

T H E F I G H T

THE FIGHT

BY

VERNON SCANNELL



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For
E. F.

CHAPTER I

"I'LL walk," Philip Dobson told himself, "I might feel better for a walk."

A bright florin of wintry sun hardened the light, and he wrinkled his eyes a little, irritated by the minute bubbles that floated intermittently past them, reminding him, as did his dry mouth and rebellious stomach, of the previous night's excesses. He had a hangover.

"A bit of fresh air, then a cup of coffee and I'll be all right."

He walked along Fleet Street, observing with melancholy relish the typists hurrying from office to cafeteria, brisk on high heels, flesh pink and tender beneath nylon, and hair rich and lustrous falling on to trim shoulders.

Yes, he had a hangover. Not a really bad one, but persistent: it would cling to him all day like the smell of tobacco. He knew all about hangovers. This was a mild one, the kind whose symptoms were always a bad taste, lassitude, visual interferences and a special kind of randiness: desire, not fixed and positive but diffused and general, shrinking from active fulfilment and satisfactorily sustained by the sight, sound and scent of women. The effort that would be demanded by contact would dispel it completely.

He reflected that he had not drunk a great deal on the previous night really: six or seven small whiskies and a couple of beers. No more, certainly. There had been a time when he would have felt little or no effect except for a slight headache which would have been dismissed by the first stiff pick-me-up. But he was not so young now;

he had to be more careful. Nowadays a night's heavy drinking had to be paid for the next day in sickness of body and spirit. Nausea would rise from stomach to throat and in his skull the pulse would throb like an aching tooth. A terrible paralysis would grip will to action; the smallest and most ordinary of tasks would assume herculean proportions; the effort of knotting his tie would leave him exhausted as a marathon runner; the job of shaving would be too formidable even to contemplate, and he would sit for an hour staring at unlaced shoes, trying to summon up the energy to tie them. And all this would be accompanied by a sense of spiritual disintegration that defied definition or analysis, and he would taste the dry bitterness of corruption.

He was not so young, he told himself with mild incredulity which did not quite hold back a faint despair.

On the opposite pavement he saw Feltham, the lobby correspondent, walking quickly, chin held high and curling dark hair disturbed a little by the breeze. Dobson felt hatred gripping him somewhere inside his chest as his eyes automatically noted the too-smart grey suit, bright butterfly of bow tie, and suède shoes. Not more than three years between them; three or four years at the most. He looked back at the slim, youthful figure and winced under the stab of injustice.

In Kingsway he stopped to buy newspapers, then continued on his way to the café in Holborn where he sometimes lunched. It was below ground-level, with walls of imitation oak panelling, and the electric lamps were artily disguised as candlesticks. The place was not very popular because the food was a little more expensive than in the larger multiple restaurants and of even worse quality. A few typists and clerks were drawn to it by the genteel atmosphere, and the remainder of its custom was supplied by a casual clientele of shoppers. Dobson used it because he could not afford anything better, and because the coffee was drinkable.

The woman in the cash desk smiled and nodded to him as he went in. He said "Good morning" and thought mechanically that she was quite pretty in a wholesome, unexciting way. Good teeth, bright clear eyes and rather full lips. But not really his type.

He took off his hat, recognising the customary flicker of reluctance, hung it up and sat down at a vacant table. Feltham must be thirty-nine, he thought, probably forty-one or two. Thick curling hair only very slightly grey at the side; the smile worn with nonchalant ease like a smart hat, adjusted to the right angle for the right occasion.

"And I'm as bald as a bloody egg," he told himself with masochistic savagery. "False teeth and bald as a bloody egg at forty-four."

The waitress came and he ordered coffee, glancing through the papers while he waited for her to bring it, his eyes gliding perfunctorily over the fake urgency of the headlines. The coffee arrived, and he threw the papers aside with genuine revulsion. What a squalid racket to be mixed up in, he thought. What was it old Swinburne had said at that dinner? "The Press is an abominable institution, a damnable institution." He would like to have seen their faces. The old chap had been right too. Claptrap about freedom and truth wouldn't fool him; he knew something about real freedom and real truth. All poets did. The power of the Press—the power of Lucifer.

He drank some of the coffee; then lit a cigarette, inhaling deeply. No, the hangover was not too bad; the cigarette tasted all right. At a nearby table two girls sat talking in subdued voices, laughing occasionally. Young, Dobson thought, nineteen or twenty. The soft unblemished skin flushed delicately with health; lovely with the dangerously vulnerable loveliness of youth. Their heads were close together, conspiratorial, as they chattered excitedly, fully alive. One of them lifted her eyes for a moment, glancing round the room as she listened to her companion, and Dobson felt himself erased by the

unrecording regard. If she saw anything at all of him it was only an anonymous middle-aged figure, entirely without interest for her; not even remarkably ugly or frighteningly malformed; but dull, to be identified perhaps with Uncle Fred, Dad, or Mr. Brown, the cashier at the office.

Dobson drank more coffee, feeling the inner mist of loneliness and melancholy rising which was not altogether unpleasant, for mingled with it was an obscure yet actual excitement. Fragments of poetry echoed in his mind, some recognised and others hovering at the boundaries of his consciousness. *Be still the hautboys and the flutes be dumb. . . . What tunes the soft enchantress plays. . . . Brightness falls from the air. . . . Timor mortis conturbat me. . . . But beauty passes. . . .*

By God, he thought, he would do it one day. Perhaps now, or that night when he got home. A poem with all the sadness of lost youth in it; poignant as autumnal woods or the mortuary of roses; there was a good phrase 'the mortuary of roses.' But not all negative sadness and nostalgia, not too lush. You had to be on your guard against that. There would be irony and bitterness: something like Prufrock or the *Waste Land*; tarts and pubs and the rest of the glittering snares for the ageing unwary. And not just despair. He would sound a note of courageous affirmation. The separate flowers wither and die, but from the earth their dying fed, other flowers came; individual beauty dies, but not Beauty. Beauty is eternal, is Truth. Beauty must die so that fresh beauty may be born. The phoenix. Something on the big scale. They said the epic was finished, but it could be done. And not pastiche either. That was the trouble with the poets to-day: no staying power, and they couldn't think of a long poem without thinking of *Paradise Lost* or the *Prelude*. Construct a new form: that's what was wanted. Contemporary idiom, sprung rhythm or something. It could be done. Hard work, of course, but it could be done.

He stubbed out his cigarette. The two girls were leaving, and he watched them walk to the cash desk. Nice legs the tall one had: the black seam down the centre of the calf made him catch his breath a little. He drank the cold dregs of his coffee, waited a few moments, for he did not wish anyone to think he was following the girls, then paid his bill and left.

In New Oxford Street he bought the lunch-time editions, tucked them under his arm, and increased his pace, walking in the direction of Tottenham Court Road. As he walked he glanced sideways at his reflection in a shop window, and immediate recognition sent slight tremors of anger and disgust over his nerves. No miraculous transformation had taken place: the rather shabby figure in belted raincoat and brown felt hat, its lack of inches emphasised by the thickness of waist, would not change except by falling into further decay. A narcissus, a middle-aged narcissus: he groaned painfully at the thought. Then again he was moved by the modified but real excitement that he had felt in the café. All of this he would incorporate into his poem. The pain of the old and the lonely: the rejected whose passions alone remained young. He would be witty, witty and cruel. The incongruity of youthful passion worn by one no longer youthful, ludicrous and embarrassing to witness like a middle-aged woman wearing a gym-slip. Something like this:

“You always loved to wear the latest fashions;
Discard, in this dark season, vivid passions.”

No, that was too much of a jingle. Something more in the vernacular, casual with a more elegiac sort of rhythm:

“Lock the wardrobe, darling, this is not the time
To wear those daring passions. Odour of camphor
Clings about them now and they reveal . . .”

Well, something of that kind. He would have to get down to it properly that night.

He thought of the book, handsomely bound, with a nice wrapper not too strident but attractive. A good heavy paper and the kind of type that makes almost any poem look good: decent margins and no parsimony over space . . . *a poet, not of promise but of real achievement . . . this moving and beautiful poem is not without a certain astringency. . . . In his work is to be found that paradoxical quality characteristic of all truly great poetry; the passionate identification of self and subject combined with a rare objectivity . . . he has looked upon the truth and not been blinded . . . this may be called without exaggeration a literary event . . . the word 'genius.'* . . .

The automatic mechanism of imagination stuck on the word 'genius,' and he groaned slightly with embarrassment. Lord, if one could watch the thoughts going on in other people's heads, what revelations there would be. The self-effacing little clerk would be seen as an aspiring dictator or tough private dick; the milkman as garlanded hero of the football match and the anæmic schoolmistress as the fatal Egyptian Queen. And what happened to those who seemed to be the true archetypes? The athlete of international reputation, the great actor, author or statesman; the perfectly beautiful woman? Was there no territory in which their imagination could make holiday? Perhaps, after all, success was the worst of human conditions.

Turning into Euston Road he was met by a gust of cold wind which almost dislodged his hat, the slight shock bringing back the external scene from which his meditations had released him. In snack bars lounged the usual melancholy negroes, and the motor salesmen stood in groups about the pavement, shifty and not quite smart in padded shoulders, smoking Weights and eyeing the legs of passing girls critically, without enthusiasm.

Dobson hurried on, turned left into a depressing street of small houses held shoulder to shoulder with a kind of

grim defiance, their uniformity broken only by a sad little newsagent's on one side and a pub on the other. The street led into a square of heavy Victorian houses, mostly converted into offices, which stared out over a small deserted park. Dobson went down the steps leading to the basement of one of these houses, pushed open the door and went inside. He stood just inside the large room for a moment sniffing the familiar acrid smell of sweat and massage oils and watching the dozen or so men in various stages of undress skipping, punching the heavy bag or lying on their backs doing abdominal exercises. Two men were sparring in the ground-level ring.

Someone shouted, "Hallo there, Phil. Come on over."

Dobson's poem had disappeared completely from his consciousness.

CHAPTER II

SID GREGORY'S gymnasium was very much like any other establishment designed or adapted for the purpose of enabling professional pugilists to perform the elaborate and exhausting ritual of training. The single window was securely shuttered, and harsh light spilled from naked bulbs upon the bare or heavily sweated bodies of the boxers who executed the intricate choreography of their art, some scorning artificial aids, others making violent use of punch-bags or skipping-ropes. The walls were decorated with posters advertising forthcoming boxing tournaments or with photographs of fighters, some of whom were posed, stripped for action, in attitudes of menace, while others, more decently clad, grinned bashfully against a background of besweated attendants and cigar-smoking managers or promoters.

Dobson edged his way carefully between young men who were dancing about upper-cutting and hooking at imaginary opponents and made his way to Gregory's side.

Sid Gregory was a parody of the popular idea of a boxer's manager. He was fat, he was rarely seen without a cigar between his lips, and he affected suits of clamorous cut and design. His features were those of a Roman emperor run to seed: a large, rather bulbous nose, luxuriant brows and thick lips above a forward-thrust chin embedded in a great curve of flesh which swept down into the embrace of his immaculately laundered collar. His dark eyes never changed, no matter what mood he appeared to be in. He might laugh uproariously or curse with rage, but those eyes, like hard little black grapes, never showed any emotion at all.

"How's it going, brother? Listen. I want you to watch this boy; he's going to go places." The idiom was Brooklyn imported by the Odeon Cinema, but the accent was unequivocally and unalterably Deptford.

The boy he referred to had just come from the dressing-room and said, "Hullo, Mr. Gregory."

"Hullo, son. Come here and meet Mr. Dobson. Phil Dobson, the best sports writer in the business. This is Johnny Blake, Phil."

Dobson nodded. The boy was beautifully muscled under healthy skin; his hair was thick and black and his face not quite handsome in a Latin way, the forehead too narrow and the eyes too bold. Automatically Dobson summed up his fighting potentialities. About ten stone seven, welterweight; good height and reach, all the weight in the shoulders where it should be; nice tapering legs.

Gregory said, "Get the gloves on, Johnny. Let Mr. Dobson see you doing your stuff. Might write a little piece about you one of these days. Hey, Mike! Get a pair of gloves on and give Johnny a couple of rounds, will you?"

"Who is this Blake?" said Dobson when the boy had gone to have gloves adjusted.

"A gift to poor managers. British amateur champion last season. Had four pro fights and won 'em all inside the distance. Only nineteen. Bringing him along slowly. Got him on a six-rounder at Mile End next week—now take a look."

Blake was in the ring with an older, scarred fighter of about the same weight.

"All the punches—all of 'em," said Gregory with satisfaction.

The boy's footwork was fascinating. He moved in and out, landing blows at will: his straight left struck with the speed and venom of a snake and he employed every orthodox punch with absolute precision—left hook, right cross and upper-cut. His opponent was completely bewildered and outclassed.

"He's good," Dobson said. "Very good. But what about Sloane? Isn't he here to-day?"

"Yes, he's here, changing. Must have gone to sleep. Dave!" he shouted. "Get a move on, for Pete's sake. Here's Phil Dobson to see you." They heard a muffled answer come from behind the door of the dressing-room.

"How is he?" Dobson asked Gregory.

"Oh, he's swell. He'll give the wise guys a shock and lick this nigger. You'll see."

Dobson grunted dubiously.

"Now listen," Gregory went on. "Don't tell me you fall for this wonder-boy stuff. It's newspaper talk. You should know that. A terrific publicity campaign. Dave'll bust the bubble all right."

"I hope so," Dobson murmured without conviction.

"Oh, here he is. Come and say 'hullo' to Phil."

Dave Sloane, wearing a shabby woollen dressing-gown and a towel round his neck, grinned amiably. He had a kindly, rugged face, a shock of faded ginger hair and innocent blue eyes.

"How are you feeling?" Dobson asked him.

"Fine."

"How do you feel about the fight?"

Sloane's face became very serious and he said earnestly, "I'm going to lick him, Phil. I know nobody believes that, but I'm going to lick him. I've got a feeling."

"I hope you do. It's time somebody brought a world title home. Are you staying in London until the fight?"

"No," Gregory interposed. "We're off to Brighton to finish off training in ten days' time. The air'll do him good."

Johnny Blake joined them, breathing quickly from his exertions in the ring. "Hallo, Dave," he said. "How goes it?"

Sloane grinned, "Not so bad, you know."

"Well, get down to work, Dave," ordered Gregory.

"I must be going," Dobson said. "You go to Brighton on the tenth. Is that right?"

"Yeah. But aren't you going to stay and see Dave work out?"

"Sorry, I haven't time. Lots of work to do."

Blake said, "Has the nigger arrived yet? He was due to-day, wasn't he?"

Dobson shrugged, "I believe so. I don't know whether he's landed yet or not."

"Nothing in the paper?"

Dobson opened one of the papers he was carrying and turned to the back page. "Oh yes, here he is."

The other men gathered round, looking over his shoulder at the photograph of a negro walking ashore down the gangway of an ocean liner.

Blake read aloud, "'The Babe arrives. Babe Simon, undefeated middleweight champion of the world, arriving at Southampton to prepare for his world title fight against Dave Sloane, the British champion. Simon is to train at Windsor.' Miserable-looking perisher, ain't he?"

"I'll see you again before the fight," Dobson said to Gregory.

"Yeah, sure. So long, Phil."

Dobson went by tube to Chancery Lane. On the journey he looked again at the photograph of the negro world champion. The face was curiously individual, even to Western eyes which tend to see little difference between one black face and another; and he was dressed unobtrusively. Gregory had said that the negro's reputation was a newspaper legend, but you couldn't get round the truth of the record book; and the facts were that Babe Simon had not been defeated, even once, and very few fighters had remained on their feet for more than two or three rounds in his company. The American fight critics said he was something unique in boxing history, that he moved as quickly as a flyweight and hit with the power of a heavyweight. The few boxers who had managed to

land a punch on him had not seemed to hurt him in the least and had been speedily disposed of for their temerity.

Dave Sloane was a fairly competent professional who had won the British middleweight championship rather through lack of competition than by virtue of unusual prowess. He was thirty years of age, which meant that he was past his prime as a boxer, and the general opinion of the critics was that he was committing suicide by going into the ring with Simon. Dobson was inclined to be cautious in his judgments and experience had taught him that prophecy was a dangerous pastime for the boxing critic. There were so many factors to be weighed when estimating a boxer's chances in a fight; nervous temperament, the possible effects of climatic conditions, the style (quite apart from the ability) of his opponent, the duration of the contest and so on. But if he, Dobson, were a betting man he would be willing to take any odds that Simon would knock the British champion out before the fight had lasted very long. The next day he would have to go to Windsor and see the negro, and he was surprised to find that the prospect generated a mild excitement.

On reaching Fleet Street he went into a pub near his office and ordered a pint of bitter and a sandwich. The bar was crowded with newspaper men, and the smoke and noise tautened his nerves. He did not like these exclusively masculine gatherings; the loud laughter and overblown bonhomie filled him with irritable distaste. As he munched his sandwich morosely he became aware of the conversation being held between the landlord and a thin-featured man with a nasal and assertive voice.

"But they're all the same, these niggers," the customer was saying, "no guts. Hit them hard and in the right place and they'll pack up straight away. In the belly. That's where they can't take it."

The landlord nodded and grunted, non-committal, politely bored.

"Louis was the same. They were all scared of him.

You've only got to stand up to them and they fold up. No guts."

Dobson felt anger quickening his pulses slightly. Why must these fools always be shooting off their mouths on things they knew nothing about? He could imagine this creature, thin, waspish, momentarily forgetful of the bitter taste of his own physical inadequacy, yelling for more blood in the smoke-filled hall, eyes gleaming behind the horn-rimmed spectacles, drinking in the sight of white-muscled flesh straining and writhing under brilliant light, the black gloves like monstrous growths on the fighters' arms flashing and thudding, instruments of an exquisite pain.

The women, too; they were even worse. The sexual kick they must get out of seeing that splendid nakedness hurt, bruised and toppled ignominiously into the dirt. Perhaps it was vengeance with them too.

Not many people saw the game as it should be seen; saw its grace and artistry, feeling that they were in the presence of the heroic. Before the contest each fighter might want to win because winning meant money, fame, admiration; but while he was in the ring all that was forgotten. The fight was the only thing that mattered: to win fairly and decisively, to overcome the adversary by superior physique, courage and skill. He did not want to win because of the purse or the prestige: he just wanted to win: the fight itself became the true goal.

You did not have to forget that or the whole racket became too squalid to contemplate. You had to remember that under those arc lights on the big night something curiously beautiful and noble was going on, something far greater than the fighters through whom it manifested itself.

It was always with faint astonishment, almost disbelief, that he remembered that he himself used to be one of the best amateur lightweights in the country. He supposed that it was one of those inexplicable accidents

of Providence, like the grim puritan becoming one of the greatest of sensuous poets, or the hedonist writing sacred music of sublime beauty.

His father had made him box in the hope it would build up his physique: it never seemed to have had much effect in that way, but after a couple of months of instruction and practice he had amazed everyone by moving round the ring and hitting like a seasoned professional. It was his reputation as an amateur boxer that had been largely instrumental in releasing him from general reporting on a provincial paper and securing him his job as boxing correspondent on one of the leading national dailies.

He remembered that there had been a time when he had thought seriously of fighting as a professional.

He must have been a queer kid at twenty, he thought, uncertain whether to set out to win a Nobel Prize for literature or the lightweight championship of the world. Not so odd when you came to think of it. It was the eighteen-ninety boys who had started the pansy-artist business; before then it was quite the thing for the poet to be a fighting man, a man of action. And even now it was only the damned self-consciousness of the age that prevented the synthesis. The Yellow Book had done its work well. The intellectual, without fully realising it, had accepted the armchair as his rightful throne and the salon or library as his domain. He was quick to quell any impulse towards animal activity, imagining it to be some kind of impediment to the full realisation of his vocation.

But it was fortunate that he, Dobson, had been sensible enough not to take up boxing professionally. He might have fallen into the hands of someone like Sid Gregory; been deceived by the unctuous affability and glib promises, never realising that fighters to Gregory were merely so much merchandise to be exploited until their market value declined, then thrown ruthlessly on the scrap heap.

Dave Sloane was the best type of prize-fighter, simple and incorruptibly honest. He deserved better treatment than he received from Gregory, who was sending him into the ring with the fabulous Babe Simon not caring for anything except his cut of twenty-five per cent. of the purse plus training expenses. After the fight Gregory would be a considerably richer man: Sloane might have suffered permanent physical damage, out of all proportion to the money he would receive.

Then there was this new lad Gregory had got hold of: Blake, Johnny Blake. He showed every sign of reaching championship class, but Gregory was just the man to overmatch him, put him in the ring with one of the tough continental or American fighters before he was strong and experienced enough to handle them. Not all managers were alike of course. Some of them loved the game and were sincerely interested in forwarding the interests of the men under their care; they were usually ex-boxers themselves and did not regard prize-fighting as an industry. But many managers were business men of a particularly unsavoury kind, receiving more or less large sums of money for which a dangerous and skilful job was performed by others. They were as bad as pimps really, whoremasters; worse than the ordinary commercial middlemen, because their merchandise was human and susceptible to suffering.

The boy Blake was typical of the valuable raw material Gregory seized upon. A good-looking boy and a natural boxer. But suspect somehow, Dobson felt. There was something almost too dynamic about him: he probably suffered from nerves. His kind usually started with a string of spectacular knockout victories, then went out suddenly like a blown fuse. After that you either never heard of them again or they carried on attempting come-back after come-back until they finished as punch-drunk trial horses low down on second-rate bills.

Dobson finished his beer and went out. He decided to

go into the office to do the paragraph on Sloane, and see McLaughlin, the Sports Editor, about going down to Windsor the next day. Then all being well he should be free. He would go home for dinner, spend the evening with Julie and get to bed early. It would make her happy and he needed an early night.

The poem was still forgotten.

Things did not go so easily in the office after all. McLaughlin, a ginger, red-nosed, picture-postcard Scotsman with a tremendous cockney accent, was having one of his periodical keenness drives.

"You're too darned conservative, Phil," he said, and paused.

"I'm an anarcho-syndicalist," Dobson murmured.

"Eh?" McLaughlin blinked. "Oh, I see, being funny. Anarchist." Then slapping his table, "Come to think of it that's just what you should be—an anarchist! All good newspaper men should be anarchists."

"I wonder whether Lord Bruin would agree." 'Lord Bruin' was the nickname bestowed without affection on the owner of the group of papers to which theirs belonged.

McLaughlin glared. "You know damned well I'm not talking in political terms. You know what I mean."

"I'm afraid I don't."

"Well, I mean a good journalist shouldn't be bound by any rules, any rules at all. The usual codes of behaviour don't apply to him, or rather he refuses to recognise them. His stories too: they don't correspond to a formula; original, imaginative, something unusual."

Dobson said, "I don't see what you're getting at. If Babe Simon knocks Dave Sloane out in the second round am I supposed to say Sloane knocked out Simon in the first? I can only say what happened."

"No, no, no. I'm not talking about straight reports

of fights. I'm talking about the build-ups. You know a lot about the game. Nine times out of ten you pick the right winner. But don't you see, occasionally it might pay to pick a loser? Arouses interest. This Babe Simon for instance: everybody says he's going to kill Sloane. Wouldn't folks sit up if you tipped the Englishman?"

"Perhaps—and wouldn't they laugh when he was knocked as cold as a polar bear's bum?"

McLaughlin rolled his eyes upwards in hyperbolic despair. "You don't understand what I'm getting at. It's new angles I want; something fresh, something the public don't read every day of their lives. See if you can get something good down at Windsor tomorrow. O.K.?"

Dobson said he would try, and went back to his desk. He picked up a copy of an American boxing magazine and flicked over the pages. His eye was arrested by a heading to an illustrated article: in heavy black type were the words **SOME BABE** and below was a large three-quarter-length photograph of Simon, stripped to the waist. The torso was superb, like a figure done in bronze by an inspired sculptor moved by a romantic vision of the noble savage. But the face was not the face of a savage. Really, Dobson reflected, only the colouring and the tight curling hair were negroid. The lips were quite thin and well shaped and the nose was almost Grecian. Perhaps the eyes, which were the most arresting feature, were African in their somnolence and melancholy, but even these were not typical. They were extraordinary eyes.

Dobson was suddenly disturbed by an inexplicable and not displeasing sensation which passed before he could recognise its nature, leaving a vaguely disquieting sense of having been caught off his guard and exposed to something half menacing yet half desirable. He stared at the photograph, and the eyes on the glossy page seemed to become alive, capturing his own in a curiously provocative challenge which again engendered the odd sensory

disturbance. Then he realised with slight shock and bewilderment that the eyes were fascinating because they were not a fighter's eyes, and not only were they not fighter's eyes, they were not even a man's eyes: they were the eyes of a woman, and the languorous intimations of sadness possessed an almost seductive quality. Had those eyes been set in the head of a woman, Dobson knew the power they would have exercised over him.

He closed the magazine quickly and tried to shake off his strange mood. He glanced through the diary on his desk to see if there were any appointments which would have to be cancelled because of his visit to Simon's training camp at Windsor the next day, but there was nothing of consequence entered there so he put on his hat and coat and left the office. Outside, the street lamps were lit and already the air ached with the chill of night. The buses lumbered past, carrying home their cargoes of workers, and at intervals along the pavements stood the queues of shop-girls, clerks and typists, waiting, not with patience, but disciplined, strained.

Dobson felt something of the night's excitement move in his blood, and the prospect of going home lost what attraction it had possessed. Perhaps he ought to have a drink first, he thought. Traces of his hangover still lingered and no doubt a couple of drinks would dispel them, give him an appetite for dinner.

At Chancery Lane Underground Station he went into a telephone box and dialled the number of his flat.

"Hullo, that you, Julie? Look, I'm afraid I'm going to be a bit later than I thought tonight. . . . Yes, got a job to do."

Her low, tired voice as usual aroused pity and irritation. He said, trying to keep impatience from his voice, "No, I don't know exactly what time. . . . No, not late. . . . Before ten certainly. Yes. . . . Goodbye."

He rang off with a sense of relief. Why did she make him feel such a bastard, he wondered. He treated her

well enough really, or at least he wasn't entirely responsible for his failures as a husband; the blame was every bit as much hers as it was his. More hers probably. She had never given him what he needed from a woman. There had always been that damned prudishness, even at the beginning, before her health had broken down. It was all very well to talk about spiritual affinity, common interests and so on, but you never really got these things with a woman. A man wanted a woman to be a woman: feminine and interesting.

Woman . . . and the word invoked images; nebulous, perhaps because he did not wish to see them too clearly, images which were composed partly of memory and partly of dream and desire. A confusion of objects, sounds and scents moved in his mind, never quite focused or absolutely identifiable: the sound of sentimental music, the tune half hidden in the throb of drum and erotic sigh and moan of violin and trumpet, sound suggesting, then becoming perfume, and then colour and scent commingled, the white rose in the blue night and in the night the house of love, the windows flushed and curtain-drawn, and there the shapes of love's dear paraphernalia, the dainty shoe with spiky spicy heel and the small lacy silken things, and woman, featureless but known and beautiful, breasts and thighs creamy smooth, and mouth as red as summer's ripest fruit.

A woman to be a woman . . . but some part of his mind refused to accept the invasion of images, recognising their falsity and insisting disconcertingly on their origin: the adolescent dream, the Technicolor film and advertisement in the journal for fashion-conscious women. The sense of guilt remained, pervasive and unpleasant as a hangover. He hurried towards the only place he knew that might offer temporary relief.

CHAPTER III

DOBSON leaned against the bar and smoked a cigarette, letting the words wash over him. Ransome did not mind that: he did not require of his audience that it should be attentive, nor that it should even make a show of interest in his discourse; in fact he only required a physical presence at which he could aim the apparently inexhaustible jet of reminiscence, prophecy, revelation or pure nonsense. To him other people were dramatic necessities for the complete effectiveness of his own performance, but they were little more than stage props, or at best he allowed them walking-on parts. He did not really grant them independent identity—except perhaps when they bought him drinks—and a show of interest in what he said would have seemed to him an impertinence. Dobson usually bought him a drink and permitted himself to be used as a sort of verbal punch-bag, partly because he was genuinely sorry for the old boy, and partly because he was absurdly and ashamedly flattered.

The curious thing about Ransome's anecdotes was that they were mainly true, or at least were based on a fairly solid foundation of truth. He had known many of the great Bloomsbury figures of the past and was mentioned by name in more than one autobiography. It was said that he had once shown considerable promise as a painter and had been encouraged by Sickert and John. But now he no longer painted; he no longer did anything except talk and stand at the bar of the Barleycorn during opening hours and sit in the dismal cafés of the district during the bleak hiatus between three and five-thirty p.m.

Nobody knew where he slept, or from what source came the money he periodically spent with prodigal generosity.

There was another reason why Dobson sought his company: Ransome still knew a few people of literary and artistic reputation who occasionally visited the Barleycorn to drink with him, and Dobson had been able through his offices to form a tenuous acquaintanceship with one or two of these minor celebrities. Dobson did not enjoy it, because they were, for the most part, boring as only second-rate artists, with their small jealousies, egocentricity and limited interests, can be. He valued it because it lent substance to a private fantasy in which he had indulged for a number of years. None of these people knew that he was a journalist, far less a sporting journalist, and those who knew him by name believed him to be Anthony Fawcett, a poet. And they were not entirely mistaken, for nine or ten years earlier he had written a few verses under that name and they had been printed in some of the obscure and ephemeral literary journals of the period.

Ever since he could remember he had wanted to be a writer; at first a novelist then, after a number of abortive attempts at writing a novel, a poet. Poetry did not make such great demands on time and energy as did novels, and though the material reward for poetry was negligible it offered a certain status and romantic cloak denied to the writer of prose.

He had discarded the name of Dobson as being too prosaic and had chosen Anthony Fawcett because it was phonetically pleasing and blended the romantic with a certain masculine vigour. He still liked the name and when indulging in his daydreams of literary fame he always thought of himself as Anthony Fawcett.

Ransome was saying, “. . . and Dewey and I and this creature who looked like Radcliffe Hall or somebody drank the whole lot, the whole lot.” His eyes, bloodshot

and protuberant, widened in an expression of triumphant pride.

Dobson, who had lost track of the story, said, "Good Heavens!"

"Well, wouldn't you have done the same?"

"Yes. Oh yes, certainly. Have another drink." He bought drinks and Ransome thanked him with ceremony. The pub was filling up though it was only just after seven o'clock, and from the public bar came the sound of an accordion playing a Neapolitan love song. Ransome, reminded of the existence of his companion by the free drink, said, "Still painting, I suppose?"

"I don't paint," answered Dobson.

Ransome's features moved strangely in what he intended to be an expression of self-reproval. "Stupid of me. Of course you don't. You're . . ." He paused but Dobson refused pettishly to speak.

Ransome extricated himself by giving a cry of joyful recognition and waving to someone at the other end of the bar. "Oh, Lorna darling. I didn't see you over there. How are you, my dear?"

The girl was alone and an almost empty beer glass stood in front of her on the bar. Her hair was blonde and perfectly straight, parted sketchily in the centre and falling down on to her shoulders. She used little or no make-up to give definition to her rather indeterminate features and her lips were almost colourless. Perhaps she could not afford cosmetics, Dobson thought: certainly she looked hard-up. She wore what looked like a man's mackintosh which was unbuttoned, showing a black knitted jumper beneath. Dobson could see the thrust of small breasts and wondered whether she stood with the coat open for the deliberate purpose of showing them. Her eyes looked very large in her thin, pallid face and were remarkably handsome.

She smiled faintly at Ransome's greeting and Dobson felt her regard upon him and was glad that he had kept

on his hat. It did not matter in a pub, he felt: lots of men kept their hats on in pubs.

She came over to them holding her glass, which contained about half an inch of flat beer.

"You're looking very lovely," said Ransome, his eyes wandering absently round the bar.

"So are you," she said.

Ransome moved away to talk to someone who had just come in. Dobson was surprised by the depth of the voice from so slight a body. Now that she was close to him he could see she was older than he had at first thought: thirty or thirty-two at a guess. But quite attractive.

"Will you have a drink?" he said.

She looked at him without smiling and said, "How are you fixed? Can you stand a short? Don't say you can if you're broke."

He said, "I'm all right."

"I'll have a gin then." She lit a cigarette and said, "I suppose you *do* something?"

"I write a bit," he said, a little embarrassed.

"What is your name?"

"Fawcett. Anthony Fawcett."

"Sounds phoney."

Dobson was annoyed to feel confusion heating his face. Then he grinned and said, "Of course it is."

She said, "Well, what do you do for a living?"

"I write."

She looked bored, rather disdainful.

"You don't believe me?" he said.

She drained her glass. "I'd believe anything for another gin."

He emptied his own glass and ordered a whisky and a gin.

She said, "You must write best-sellers. What's your *nom de plume*—J. P. Beastly?"

Ransome, who must have seen Dobson buying some

drinks, reappeared. Jovial and obsequious, he said to the girl, "Oh, you know my friend here? He is a damned good painter, damned good." He beamed fondly upon Dobson.

The girl's eyebrows rose a fraction. "A man of many parts. Which are you damned goodest at, writing or painting?"

Dobson said in an annoyed voice, "I don't paint."

Ransome, seeing that he had done nothing to gain Dobson's charity, moved off again with an abstracted and unintelligible murmur.

The girl said, "Don't be embarrassed. We're all little geniuses here: poet, painter, composer—what's the difference? What's the difference so long as you feel it in here?" She clasped her bosom and closed her eyes ecstatically. Then suddenly in a hard voice, "Why don't you act like a grown-up? It's all right for these kids to hang about in corduroys longing for beards to grow and turn them into real artists, but you're old enough to know better. What's so marvellous about artists anyway? Bricklayers and butchers are a damned sight more useful."

Dobson said, "Look, you asked me what I did for a living and I told you. With qualifications I share your approval of bricklayers and butchers but I don't see any point in posing as one. I haven't the technical knowledge anyway. Somebody would be sure to denounce me."

There seemed to be more respect in the look she gave him as she said, "How about another drink? Can the bank stand it?"

"Of course," he said, ordering the drinks. But he was a little worried by the rapidity with which she swallowed gins, for he had only a few pounds to last him until he drew his salary, which was not for another five days, and he remembered that he had already drawn on expenses. He would not have to spend much more.

"Well, here's to the next best-seller," she said, and

smiled over her glass. She looked nice when she smiled: her eyes were very beautiful. Dobson glanced surreptitiously in the mirror behind the bar, thinking that he did not look too bad, and he was again grateful for the hat.

"Do you come around these parts often?" she asked.

Dobson said, "I too have lived in Fitzrovia."

"For gawd's sake," she said.

He spoke quickly, "What about your answering a few questions? I've been at the wrong end too long. What do *you* do for a living?"

"I'm a trapeze artiste."

"No, seriously, what do you do? Are you married?"

"A little," she said.

Dobson felt the vague excitement she had aroused in him become canalised and flow into a central pool of recognised desire. Her eyes held disturbing half-promises: she had the kind of figure he liked, slender, strong and supple. The prima donna figure had never held much attraction for him.

"Drink up. Let's have another," he said, forgetting his earlier resolution to conserve his money.

She said, "I think I'm beginning to like you," handing him her glass. The chorus of bottles and tumblers ranged behind the bar gleamed crystal and amber and voices rippled and burst with minor explosions in the smoky air, and all the time the sweet and vulgar voice of the accordion sang of passion or of lachrymose farewells. Dobson began to feel happily sentimental.

He said, "You have beautiful eyes. Very beautiful."

She smiled. "I think you're pretty too."

"No, really," he said, "you have extraordinarily lovely eyes."

Then to Dobson's disgust Ransome rejoined them. He was holding a glass of bitter. "Odious stuff," he said, "but buggers can't be choosers, eh?" And he laughed immoderately.

Dobson's annoyance was increased by the girl's

apparent willingness to have Ransome come back and break up their conversation.

Ransome began to talk. "Just been speaking to Polly Everett and John Mallard. They've gone over to the White Cow. Don't know what they see in that place: awful people. The last time I went there a tragedy of some magnitude befell me. I was carrying a book; rather valuable first edition given me by Bertie Stillwell. I'd been to quite a few pubs that night and landed up at the White Cow and found I wanted to go to the lavatory. You know what it's like there: up about ten flights of stairs and through a sort of morgue. Well, up I went, came back and managed to swallow a couple or so of quick 'uns before the night was guillotined. Then home to bed. The next morning I woke feeling like hell and the first thing I thought of was the book I'd been carrying round with me. So I rolled out of bed and there on the table was a book. But not my book. Do you know what it was? It was a damned great telephone directory."

He paused, eyes bulging, looking from one to the other of his audience. "They use old ones—old telephone directories—for toilet paper there!" And he neighed with laughter.

Dobson smiled painfully, watching the girl's face.

She said, "And what happened to the first edition? Did you ever get it back?"

"No, never. Someone swiped it, I suppose. Probably worth five hundred."

He drank some of his beer, his eyes roving round the bar. "Oh, there's Jerry," he said. "You will pardon me?" And off he went.

"He's a dear old rogue," the girl said.

"Yes," Dobson agreed without enthusiasm. "Can be rather a bore though."

"Much less so than most people."

Dobson felt the masonry of his happiness begin to

crumble. He said, "Let's go somewhere else and have a drink, shall we? Somewhere a bit quieter."

She said, "I'm sorry—what did you say?" She had been looking towards the door and had not heard him. He repeated his request, feeling as he did so a cold current of hopelessness move through his veins. "I'd like to," she said, "but actually I have to meet somebody here."

He thought he saw an expression of slightly amused pity in her eyes and he hated her, his hatred sharpened by self-disgust; but he remained, unable to leave until dismissal became explicit.

'The vulgar bitch,' he thought, 'with her frayed wisecracks, carrying her sex like a banner,' and he wanted badly to hurt her.

Her glass was empty and after a moment's hesitation he said, "Another?"

As he was ordering the drinks he heard her voice behind him greeting someone she sounded glad to see. He turned and handed her the gin.

She said, "Meet a friend of mine, Roddy Fenton. This is Tony—I'm sorry I didn't catch the second name."

"Fawcett," Dobson said.

"Tony Fawcett. He's a writer."

Roddy, who had coarse, handsome features and an abundance of fair hair, showed excellent teeth in an amiable if rather animal smile. "Oh yes," he said with patently false interest, "what do you write?"

The reappearance of Ransome rescued Dobson from the necessity of answering.

"How are you, my boy?" Ransome beamed at Roddy. "That's a handsome tie you're wearing—a trifle *fin de siècle* perhaps, but that's all to the good."

Dobson swallowed his drink quickly and said, looking at his watch, "Well, I must be going now. An appointment. Good night!"

"Must you really," the girl said. "What a pity." But

she sounded less concerned than Roddy, who was obviously expecting a drink.

"So soon, old chap," he exclaimed, his eyebrows caricaturing surprise. "It's barely nine o'clock."

"Good night," said Dobson again and went out.

The night air was cold as glass against his temples and he realised his eyes were aching from the tobacco smoke that filled the Barleycorn. The resentful dislike that he had felt for the girl left him, leaving only a residue of self-contempt and weariness. He felt as though he had walked a great distance: heavy folds of tiredness were draped about his limbs and the spirits he had drunk no longer stimulated but dulled his mind, and made the prospect of sleep acutely desirable. He decided to take a taxi home, justifying the extravagance illogically on the grounds that he had already spent more than he could afford.

As he climbed the stairs to his flat he tried by an effort of will to throw off the sense of fatigue which he knew would make him irritably impatient with Julie. He would be nice to her, he resolved; the poor girl did not have much of a life these days.

She was sitting before an electric fire wearing a dressing-gown and slippers, and an open novel lay face downwards on the arm of the chair.

She said, "Hullo, dear. I didn't expect you back so soon."

Her face was thin and very pale, the flesh giving an impression almost of translucence, and her fair, rather dull hair was drawn back into a coil at the nape of her neck. Her eyes looked tired, and her sick-room appearance was probably increased by the complete absence of make-up.

"I managed to get away early," Dobson said. He kissed her forehead and she touched his wrist lightly with her fingers as he bent over her. "How have you been feeling?"

She smiled faintly, the weakness of her voice contradicting its message: "Quite well really."

As he looked at her face he tried hard to feel some kind of sympathetic emotion; pity, kindness, love; but it seemed that he knew the face too well: it was like a tune that at first seems pleasant but is subsequently heard so many hundreds of times that it becomes a meaningless sequence of sounds which engenders, if anything at all, a mild annoyance.

She said, "Have you had dinner?"

"No, but I'm not hungry."

"There's some cold meat in the kitchen." She made a movement as if to rise.

"No, don't get up," he said. "I'll just make myself a sandwich. What about you? Could you eat something?"

"No, thank you, dear, but a cup of coffee would be nice if you're making some for yourself. Don't bother unless you want some."

He went into the kitchen and ate a sandwich while the coffee was percolating. Then he carried coffee and cake back into the sitting-room and set the tray on a small table between them.

"Had a hard day?" she asked.

"So-so." Then remembering his determination to be affable he added, "Went to Gregory's gym. You've heard me talk about him."

"The one who looks like a prime minister?"

"Did I say that?" he asked.

"Yes, if I'm thinking of the right person. A promoter or manager or something."

"Yes, that's him. I suppose he does look like a prime minister in a way—no, more like a dictator, not unlike Mussolini really."

"What did you have to see him for?"

"Oh, he manages Sloane, the middleweight champion, and Sloane is fighting an American negro for the world title in a couple of weeks or so."

"Would that be the negro whose picture's in the evening paper?"

"Probably."

"Looks handsome—for a negro, I mean."

Dobson was disconcerted by a slight but recognisable sensation which he remembered from the days when Julie was young, her hair gold with lamplight captured in its tresses, the curve of cheek soft and delicately ripened, music playing and somebody more handsome than himself dancing with her. It was strange that, after passion had died, the humiliating presence of its grim attendants, jealousy and resentment, should remain. Quite vividly he saw the almost sinister beauty of Simon's black torso and face curiously vital on the dead, glossy page.

He grunted, "He's a world champion, not a May queen. His profile is of no importance."

Julie said, "Who'll win?"

Just in time Dobson managed to curb a bad-tempered reply. He said, "He's not been beaten yet and I can't see Sloane doing it. Second-raters have beaten Sloane."

He got up from his chair and went over to the bookcase and stood with his hands in his pockets gazing at the titles, which scarcely made contact with his mind.

Julie said, "I wish you'd start writing again. Writing seriously I mean."

He was shocked by an odd feeling of guilt as if she had surprisingly confronted him with some evidence of his insufficiency or infidelity, and he did not answer.

She said, "Did you hear me, Philip?"

He left the bookcase and returned to his chair. "What prompts that observation?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know. You seem dissatisfied somehow. I thought perhaps. . . . Well, it seems unnatural not to . . ." Her voice wavered momentarily, then went on, "It seems wrong to waste gifts that so many people would envy you."

"I have no gifts."

"But you have. You know you have. Your poetry . . ."

He said, "My poetry? A few verses no better and no worse than other adolescent effusions."

But he did not really believe it to be true. He knew that he had something, a power of perception not common, a talent—no, that was not the word; billiards players were talented, not poets—a good demon. If only he had the energy, the strength to begin.

Julie said, "You seemed so different when you were writing poetry. So much happier."

He said bitterly, accusingly, "I think you overrate the therapeutic powers of metrical composition."

He guessed that she had not understood what he meant, but the tone of his voice was unmistakable and her face showed the now familiar look of hurt bewilderment.

Oh Christ, he thought, why couldn't he leave her alone? He must make amends: he must make some gesture.

But the wounded face evoked a distaste in him too strong to allow pity expression, and he said, "Well, I must go to bed. Tomorrow I'm going to Windsor to see the beautiful black man."

He paused for a moment trying hard to overcome the force that strangled the affectionate word but could only manage a slight uncomfortable grin and the words, "Cheer up, Julie. You looked tired."

She said, smiling faintly and exasperatingly, "I'll stay up and read for a bit, I think."

So Dobson went into the bedroom and left her with her library book.

So he had come home quite early after all, Julie thought. But he had been drinking. The smell when he had kissed her had been unmistakable; unmistakable

and horrible. Why did he do it? Standing about in dreadful public houses drinking whisky or beer, listening to the coarse voices of people who looked like bookmakers and ageing chorus girls. What possible pleasure could he find in it? She had heard of people 'getting merry' but Philip never seemed to be any happier after drinking. It made him look so awful too. His skin became blotchy and his eyes looked red and sometimes rather cruel. It wasn't as if he had an unhappy home life: she was never quarrelsome and tried hard not to worry him even when she was feeling ill. The flat was nice and cosy and he had his books and radio. Lots of men would envy him those things but he didn't seem to attach any value to them at all. She simply could not understand it.

If only he would write poetry again. Things were so different then; he even looked different—kinder and happier. Of course, you couldn't just write poetry as people wrote letters, but she could not see why, since he had once written it, he should suddenly stop. He had proved that he had the inspiration, or gift or whatever it was. And she could think of no reason why the wish to exercise it, which had once been so strong, should suddenly disappear. Also he had been so much nicer to her in those days. True, she had been prettier then, but real love didn't depend on mere physical attraction.

Perhaps it was this horrid boxing business that was making him become coarse. All the frightful people he must meet and the boxing itself, the hitting and the bleeding and all the people shouting: it must be really quite dreadful. It was such a pity that he couldn't be a dramatic critic or something like that. He would be able to do it all right, she was sure of that. He was very clever: often she did not understand him properly, some of the things he said, but she knew he was clever. And he used to be so interested in plays and books. He used to give her books to read: some of them had been odd—by Americans and foreigners—but some of them had been

quite nice. But he never gave her books to read now. He did not read any himself.

Perhaps this new medicine would make her feel better and then she would feel more able to cope with things. If she were just a little stronger she would be able to do something about Philip. Persuade him to change his job, perhaps. It would be nice if he were a dramatic critic and she felt well again. They would be able to go to the theatre quite often and talk about the plays just like they used to. It had been nice in the old days, sitting late over coffee listening to Philip talking about the play they had seen. He really did speak so well about things like that: just like the critics you read in the papers: the same kind of words and phrases that she herself would never have been able to use quite naturally the way he did, even if she had understood them properly. He would probably stop drinking if he could get away from the job he had now.

Julie leant back in the chair and closed her eyes, and then the darkness became a screen on which she saw herself quietly but expensively gowned and coiffeured, chatting in the foyer of a West End theatre with a small group of distinguished-looking people whose exact identity she could not for the moment specify but whose importance was beyond question.

Whispered voices said: "That is Philip Dobson's wife." "Yes, the dramatic critic." "Yes, she is rather lovely, isn't she?" "Oh, they're all terrified of bad notices from him. He can make or break reputations over night."

She saw the actors and actresses bowing from the stage to the applause, raucous from the gallery but more restrained from the stalls, and it seemed that the leading lady and man were anxious to convey the impression that their obeisances were intended for her and Philip alone. Supper at Delano's with Sir Laurence, handsome and without any of that unfortunate coarseness of skin

and features that so many actors often reveal at close quarters. Sir Laurence leaning forward listening intently to Philip: "Yes, I see what you mean. I quite agree. Spatial limits. Declamatory. Interpretation. Quite so." Photographers, bouquets, and waiting limousines attended by impassive and smartly uniformed chauffeurs. Then without any sense of surprise or incongruity Julie found herself on the stage bowing as the audience called her name over and over again; flowers were heaped at her feet and she kissed her hands to the ecstatic gallery. Sir Laurence stood at her side smiling, a little rueful perhaps, but gallantly accepting the situation: the applause was all for her. Then she saw, looking up at her from the stalls, Philip, arms held out in a gesture of appeal, surrender and adoration, tears streaming down his uplifted face. She smiled at him very tenderly and threw him a small posy of flowers which he caught deftly between his teeth. . . .

Julie slept, and the falling of the novel from the arm of the chair to the floor did not disturb her dream.

CHAPTER IV

SID GREGORY'S flat was spacious and for his purposes admirably situated. The broad windows of the lounge, soundproofed against the traffic of the Bayswater Road, overlooked Hyde Park, a pleasant enough prospect at all times of the year, and the building stood within a bare half-mile of his gymnasium. The flat was furnished expensively and with a brave disregard for the æsthetic conventions which make the homes of more timid souls so uniformly dull. The walls glittered with an abundance of mirrors, some of which bore upon their surfaces floral designs in yellow, green and red, and a considerable space was occupied by photographic records of various milestones in Sid's career. There was a rather faded picture of him standing side by side with the late Mrs. Gregory, a tall and angular woman with dark, expressionless eyes, long features and a most determined mouth and jaw. The photograph had presumably been taken on the occasion of their marriage, for Mrs. Gregory was clad in some shapeless garment which looked like lace curtains pinned carelessly upon her person and she carried a small bunch of unidentifiable flowers, while a slender and scarcely recognisable Sid wore a severe black suit with trouser legs of Dickensian narrowness and a large white carnation.

Though the colour of the carpets conflicted stridently with each other and with the walls and the furniture, their thickness and general opulence was redolent of a luxury usually associated with the residences of Eastern potentates or American night-club proprietors.

A baby grand piano stood beneath one of the windows

contriving to give the impression of having maintained an unbroken silence for a considerable period, and from a cabinet of bright new wood and aggressively modern design stared the glaucous eye of a television screen. Philip Dobson had once visited the flat and described it felicitously to a colleague as being furnished in late Rococo-Cola style.

It was early evening and Gregory was reclining in an armchair before a large electric stove which was disguised with moderate success as a log fire. He lay back in the bulging embrace of the chair, his head cocked to one side, and from his open mouth and nostrils issued regular snorts and whistles as he slumbered; one arm, weighted with sleep, hung over the edge of the chair and swung almost imperceptibly to and fro above an open copy of *Boxing News* which lay on the floor beneath the gentle pendulum of his half-curved fingers. He did not stir when the door opened and a girl came into the room, removed her hat and coat, and advanced to the mirror above the mantelpiece, where she titivated her hair and applied lipstick without once glancing at his sleeping figure.

Like the flat she looked expensive, but her furnishings were in better taste. Her black hair was lustrous and disciplined, her tailored suit only a shade too smart, and her figure and legs were slender and admirably shaped. The face which stared back at her from the mirror was pretty, stupid and almost entirely without animation except for a latent sensuality and cruelty in the eyes and mouth. The best cosmetics expertly applied and the careful, practised expression of faintly insolent candour assiduously copied from magazine and motion picture did not quite succeed in disguising the avaricious and ruthless features of the slum harlot. But very nearly; to the casual eye she might appear to be an appealing young lady of the prosperous middle classes, though only to the most sentimental or fatuous observer could she ever

appear wholly innocent. She finished the contemplation of her face with a sidelong glance at her profile, and her expression registered detached satisfaction as though she had been appraising a piece of embroidery; then she lit a cigarette and stood over Gregory, watching him dispassionately as he slept, the great fleshy face relaxed and defenceless, robbed of its usual wariness and reduced by the sagging mouth and half-open glazed eyes to a semblance of imbecility. Then, cigarette between her lips, she deliberately extended a neatly shod foot and tapped him twice on the ankle of his outstretched leg. For a moment he remained motionless; then he groaned and turned on to his other side, began to speak, but the words stayed an inarticulate mess in his throat. His eyes opened and at once his features recomposed themselves, his mouth closed and he sat up.

"Hullo, honey," he said, "where you been?"

"Pictures," she said.

"Pictures," he echoed, indulgent and scornful. "Five times a week. Don't know what you'd do without 'em."

She did not answer, but sat down in the armchair opposite him and crossed her elegant legs.

"What *would* you do without them?" he insisted. "Suppose there wasn't any pictures to go to? What would you do?"

She shrugged. "Don't be silly." It was apparent that she could not conceive a world without cinemas.

Gregory said, "Listen, Tina. I want you to whip up a nice little meal. We've got somebody coming round at eight."

"Who?"

"Young fella named Blake. A new boy I've got in the stable."

"A boxer," she said. "Don't you see enough of them?"

"I know what I'm doing. My boxers get the dough that keeps you looking pretty. This boy's going to be

good and I want him to stay with me. Now you see and be nice to him."

"What's so wonderful about him? What weight is he?"

"Welter. But he'll build up to a cruiser. He's a sure thing for a British title. Maybe the world. I've only got one champion and I'm going to lose him in three weeks' time. I've got to get another and Johnny Blake's the boy."

Gregory lit a cigar and blew smoke rings upwards, watching their progress to the ceiling speculatively.

Tina said, "What do you mean you're going to lose your champion? You talking about Sloane?"

"Yeah. This nigger Simon is going to eat him."

Her smooth brow became very faintly wrinkled and she said, "What are you putting him against the nigger for if he's going to be beaten?"

Gregory smiled and blew out more aromatic smoke.

"Because old Dave's going to go in there and win me fifteen hundred quid. That's my cut of the purse. He's near finished anyway and it's a good way to go out. A blaze of glory. He'll take a lacing for five or six rounds and go down with the old red-white-and-blue flying."

"How do you know? You've not seen the nigger, have you? How do you know he'll beat Sloane?"

Gregory laughed. "This Babe Simon ain't human. He's a fighting machine. There's never been anything like it ever. He's licked everything without raising a sweat. A couple of months ago he flattened Jack Peters in one round, and Peters is one of the heavyweight title contenders. Heavyweight, mind you, and Simon's a middle. I tell you he's dynamite."

"What makes you say that Sloane will last for five or six rounds then?"

"Because, my sweet, our Dave's a jaw made of one hundred per cent. granite. I may be wrong but I fancy it will take even Simon a few rounds to put him away."

Tina said slowly, "But you never know. Funny things happen. Sloane might beat him."

"You're crazy. Miracles don't happen any more. Now be a good girl and go and fix some food. And remember, be nice to this kid: he's going to be our meal ticket one of these days."

Tina stubbed out her cigarette and Gregory watched with complacent approval her self-conscious, swaying progress across the room towards the kitchen. He was proud of her, or rather he was proud of his own sagacity in having acquired her: she had proved a good purchase like his car and his home. He was never tricked into buying anything fake. She was a peach, he thought, and unlike so many dames she could do her stuff in the kitchen as well as in bed. She was a great kid. And he picked up his *Boxing News* and began to read.

At two minutes to eight Johnny Blake arrived. The doorbell rang and Gregory heaved himself out of the chair and went into the hall to usher the boy into the room, where he stood uncomfortably for a moment in his bright blue belted overcoat, gazing around with awe while Gregory, mildly gratified, allowed him to take full stock of all the spendour.

"Give us your coat, Johnny, and take a seat."

Blake removed his coat and sat down stiffly by the glowing imitation logs.

Gregory returned from hanging up the coat. "Well, son," he said briskly, "not a bad little place here, is it?"

Johnny signified assent.

"We'll have a bit of grub in a minute. The missus is getting it ready."

The boy grinned uncomfortably, ill at ease in such magnificent surroundings. His usually white face was pink from the chill night wind and his dark hair curled over the brown eyes which had been robbed of much of their customary boldness by his shyness. Gregory watched him, smiling, paternal and false; thinking that he was a

good-looking kid and would probably have woman trouble once he made the grade. Still, that would make him better box office. Tina came into the room, swaying gently on high heels, and regarded Blake with calm incuriosity. He stared and reddened. He had not expected 'the missus' to look like a film star.

"Here you are, Tina," Gregory said. "This is Johnny Blake. I was telling you about him."

She smiled and said, "Hullo."

Johnny intimated in some confusion that he was pleased to meet her and suddenly remembered to stand up. She stared directly at him, still smiling slightly until his eyes slid away searching the room's furnishings for some place of refuge; then she turned and began to lay the table with unhurried efficiency.

Gregory, who had been watching with mild amusement the effect Tina had had on Blake, said, "How do you feel about Friday?"

Johnny tried to reassemble the broken pieces of his equanimity. "Friday?" he said.

Gregory grinned. "Don't tell me you've forgotten Mile End."

"Oh no, no, of course not. I feel fine. I'll lick him all right."

"Sure you will. He'll be a sucker for your right cross."

They talked of boxing until the meal was ready, then they sat at the table while Tina filled their plates.

"Aren't you eating, honey?" Gregory asked her.

She told him that she was not hungry.

"What do you think of 'em, these women?" he said, affable and flatteringly conspiratorial to Blake. "Live on chocolates and fags. No wonder they're as thin as rakes."

Tina, unperturbed, produced another cigarette and lit it. Its perfect whiteness emphasised the deep red of her lips. Johnny felt more self-conscious and he knew that she was watching him and the knowledge made his handling of knife and fork clumsy: he wondered whether he

was violating some rules of etiquette unknown to him, and he tried to remember the rare admonitions that his mother had delivered over the table when he was a child, hungry from playing in the streets of Bethnal Green. But he only recalled that he should not put his knife into his mouth: if there had been any other interdicts he had forgotten them. Surreptitiously he watched Gregory, who was eating with gusto and apparently small consideration for such formal niceties.

Tina said, "Aren't you hungry, Johnny, or is my cooking so bad?"

He gulped and felt embarrassment warming the flesh of his face and neck. "No," he said, "I'm not very. It's very nice cooking."

He was vastly relieved when the meal came to an end and Tina cleared away the dishes.

She came back from the kitchen and said, "Well, I hope you don't think I'm going to sit around and listen to you two going on about boxing all night. What's on the television?"

Gregory grinned. "When it's not pictures it's television. What would you do if there wasn't any things like that? What would you do if you were on a desert island?"

"Depends who I was with," she replied in a voice the coquetry of which disconcerted Johnny, who was not sufficiently experienced to observe how mechanical it was.

She consulted the *Radio Times* and announced with satisfaction, "Oh good! There's a cabaret on. Come on, you two."

A large couch was drawn up before the television set and she took Gregory's hand and led him to it, pushing him playfully back into the cushions at one end.

"Sit here, champ," she ordered Blake, indicating the other end and making it obvious she intended sitting between them.

Johnny sat down close to the edge, feeling a nervous grin over which he had no control pulling at his mouth.

She pushed him backwards, saying, "Make yourself comfy." Then she switched on the set and turned off the lights in the room.

There was the sound of music, and after brief flickerings and amorphous shapes had appeared and disappeared on the screen two Spanish dancers emerged moving in patterns of intricacy and grace which were not wholly vitiated by the constantly changing camera angles and the intermittent bouts of *ague* that troubled the screen. Johnny's view was obscured for a moment as Tina passed between him and the set: she sat down, lowering herself with one hand carelessly placed on his knee. When she was settled she removed her hand but Johnny could feel the area of his flesh where she had touched him tingling as if it had been branded. He could smell her perfume in the darkness, sweet and in some way melancholy, and her presence seemed to radiate strange electric waves, delightfully distracting.

He saw little of what was being shown on the screen because he was trying to conjure up before his mind's eye the image of her face as he had seen it when she entered the room: calm, remote, and more beautiful than anything he had seen before, the sleek black hair framing the pale forehead and the dark eyes eloquent with a certain knowledge of worlds unknown to him; her lips, deep red and parting very slightly in a musing smile showing the small teeth white as peppermints.

How had old Gregory managed to get such a smashing wife, he wondered. What could have made her marry him when anybody would jump at the chance of marrying her? Of course, he had got plenty of money but so had lots of other people. And he was so fat and old. Could she really . . . could they do 'it.' She, so lovely and slender, and old Gregory like he was. Johnny thought of him shovelling food into his mouth, perspiring slightly

as he chewed, eyes vacant, totally absorbed in the business of eating; then leaning back in his chair after the meal and belching without saying pardon or anything. It was very odd: there were lots of things you couldn't understand. When Gregory had said 'the missus' Johnny had expected somebody old and fat like he was. And in came Tina. It was a nice name; like a film star or something. She was like a film star, better really. And she was 'the missus.'

The Spanish dancers had finished and a plump lady in an evening gown was singing a song:

"Some day my happy arms will hold you,
Some day I'll know that moment divine,
When all the things you are, are mine."

The violins wept quietly and melodiously, but beneath their soft lamentation could be heard the urgent beat of passion's eager pulse, its clamour modified but threatening at any moment to dominate the nostalgic and tender assurances of the strings.

"You are the promised breath of springtime
That makes my lonely winter seem long."

Tina was singing beside him in the darkness, her voice low, husky and out of tune. A slight tremor disturbed him and he had to clench his fists tightly in order to control it. Gregory's cigar glowed red, an exotically perfumed flower in their warm and intimate night.

The song came to an end and the plump lady smiled extravagantly before being usurped by a comedian with a Lancashire accent and bad teeth. Occasionally Gregory chuckled at some joke and Johnny would laugh a little with him from some sense of social obligation, but he was not amused nor was he paying much attention to the sad buffoonery of the comedian. Tina was quite silent.

The Lancashire comedian was succeeded by an impersonator who declaimed a short passage from one of

Mr. Churchill's speeches, a few lines from the film *Mutiny on the Bounty*, and uttered with a French accent ardent protestations of love and admiration to an imaginary lady. Then he began to sing "You are my heart's delight" in a curiously nasal voice, this time with a German accent.

In the middle of the song Johnny felt a very slight pressure against his leg. Shock ran through him tingling every muscle and nerve, and his mind whirled in a chaos of disbelief, hope and astonishment. He sat perfectly still, scarcely breathing, his abdominal muscles taut with strain. Then, so slightly that he could not be sure imagination had not deceived him, the pressure increased. Afraid to move either in response, lest the contact should be accidental, or away lest, if it were not, she should think her action unwelcome to him, he remained rigid, tenanted by an excitement that spread through him like a fever.

He began to perspire and his mouth became dry. Involuntarily he cleared his throat and the sound was thunderous in his own ears. Immediately, as if the cough had been a signal, the pressure of her leg against his own increased and he knew without any doubt that it was a deliberate overture. And from this astounding knowledge emerged a huge, unanswerable mark of interrogation. His experience of women was too severely circumscribed to help him towards any explanation, and her proximity hopelessly impeded the smooth working of his brain. He heard, as if from a great distance, the strained tenor voice singing the shabby musical comedy tune, her scent was in his nostrils and her leg against his moving occasionally, just a little, in a kind of caress and the great silent 'why' remained unanswered. Then he was aware with amazement that he was returning the secret caress; it was almost as if his limb were behaving independently, moving, pressing, aware of the smooth flesh, silk-covered. And it was then that sexual desire became explicit, his

young flesh, eager and straining, and the memory of her eyes emerged undisguised and he could barely prevent himself from reaching out into the darkness and grasping the warm softness of thigh, breast and buttock.

Quite suddenly her leg moved away from his and he realised that the television programme had come to an end. He heard Gregory's voice but his mind was unable to attribute meaning to the sounds.

There was movement and noise; she was no longer by his side; then the room was filled with light, bright and disenchanting as cold water. He blinked, knuckled his eyes and glanced almost furtively at Gregory, then down at his leg, half expecting to see some external evidence of his complicity. He felt dazed, guilty, and the vibrations of the intense excitement he had known still troubled his composure. In a bewildering state of trepidation and fascination he turned to look at Tina, who had risen to switch on the lights. She was walking back to the couch, a freshly lit cigarette between her lips and her eyes, sleepy, were just a little moist behind the blue veil of smoke.

"Did you enjoy it, Johnny?" she said.

Gregory said, "That fella who took off Churchill was good, you know. Very clever, I thought."

A sense of unreality assailed Johnny as he saw her absolute self-possession. Could he have dreamed those moments of contact in darkness? Could there have been some sort of fantastic mistake? She was not acting a part, of that he was sure. She was perfectly at ease and the casual look she gave him seemed not without a hint of mockery. He wondered whether she was one of those women he had heard people talk about; one of those women who liked to tantalize men, then leave them angry and unsatisfied just to feel their own power. Well, no tart was going to worry him. He was a fighter and fighters had no time for women anyway. If they did they were as good as finished. He would get right out of the place: he had known from the first he did not belong there.

He realised with a nervous shock that he was staring at her and could guess that his expression showed the anger and resentment he was feeling. She answered his regard with the smallest movement of an eyebrow and movement of lips that he was quite powerless to interpret.

He stood up and said, "I've got to go now, Mr. Gregory. Thank you for having me here."

Gregory said, "Oh, it's early yet, son. Why not stay on a while and have a cup of coffee or something?"

"No, I'd better go now. Takes me a good while to get home and I told ma I'd not be late."

"O.K., son, if that's the way you want it. Get Johnny his coat, Tina. It's hanging in the hall."

She helped him on with the coat and he was embarrassed and ungracious when he had difficulty in finding one of the armholes.

She said, facing him, "Now don't catch cold," and she reached out and straightened unnecessarily the silk scarf he was wearing.

He stared at her, blushing and puzzled, then turned and said, "Well, good night, Mr. Gregory. I'll see you tomorrow, I expect, at the gym."

Tina followed him into the hall. "Good night, Johnny," she said at the door.

"Good night, Mrs. Gregory," he answered gruffly and went out.

She was laughing quietly to herself when she returned to the lounge.

"What's the joke?" Gregory asked.

"What a funny kid that was!"

"Why? How do you mean 'funny'?"

"I'm sure he thinks I'm really Mrs. Gregory."

Gregory grunted, "Well, why shouldn't he? He's only a kid."

After a pause she said, "I didn't like him. There's something cocky about him. He was quiet enough tonight but give him half a chance."

“What are you getting at?” said Gregory.

“Oh, nothing. I just didn’t like him.”

“Oh, you’re nuts. He’s a nice enough kid.”

“Maybe.” She turned the pages of the *Radio Times*, humming beneath her breath.

“Get me a drink, honey,” Gregory said.

She rose languidly and walked, hips gently undulating, to the cocktail cabinet. As she poured his drink she sang huskily, tunelessly:

“Some day my happy arms will hold you.”

She didn’t know the other words so she sang the same line over and over again.

CHAPTER V

MCLAUGHLIN, the Sports Editor, glanced up as Dobson came in, then returned to his perusal of the copy on his desk. Dobson eyed his bent head with dislike, took out a cigarette and lit it. He blew out smoke and said, "You wanted me?"

Without looking up McLaughlin said abstractedly, "Mm, yes. In a moment."

Dobson flushed and the muscles at the angles of his jaws twitched. Finally McLaughlin pushed the sheets of paper away from him and leaned back in his chair looking at Dobson without speaking. Dobson returned his scrutiny, noting the pale, bloodshot eyes, the large pores on the red, boozier's nose. McLaughlin was a teetotaller, though no one would have believed it after the most cursory glance at his features. Actually the facial discoloration was caused by some kind of stomach disorder.

"I've been reading your Babe Simon piece," he said with menacing softness.

Dobson cleared his throat and looked uncomfortable.

They were both silent for a few seconds, then McLaughlin said, "Well?"

Dobson said, "What about it?"

"What about it? Were you drunk when you wrote it?"

"Of course I wasn't."

"Of course you weren't! I don't think there's any 'of course' about it. You were either drunk or mad. You didn't by any chance have the gloves on with Simon while you were down there, did you? That might explain it."

Dobson said, "What's wrong with the story?" But his voice sounded apprehensive.

McLaughlin gave him a mean look. "Do you really want me to tell you?" he said menacingly. "Do you?" Then he changed his expression adeptly and went on in a voice of strained reasonableness: "Now look here, Phil. You know as well as I do that it's the worst piece of work you've ever done. I can't think what could have possessed you. I hope for your own sake you were tight, or you might go and do the same thing again. Good God, look at it, just look at it!" His voice rose, shedding restraint as he picked up the sheets of paper. "All this stuff about primeval mystery and wisdom of the blood. And *beautiful!* *Beautiful* about a coon; about the middleweight champion of the world!" His voice ascended to an indignant howl. "Who the hell do you think you are? Virginia Woolf or somebody!"

Dobson shuffled and remained silent, staring bleakly over the Sports Editor's head.

McLaughlin went on, "Look, you've been at the game long enough not to need me to tell you how to set about it. You know what's wanted for a little feature like this—damn it, you haven't even said whether he's married or single, what he eats, or anything. What the hell did you ask him when you interviewed him?"

Dobson said, "He didn't talk."

A sudden look of suspicion replaced the wrathful mask worn by McLaughlin. "Here, you sure you went to Windsor yesterday? You sure you *did* see him?"

"Of course I went. He just wasn't interviewable. When I asked him the usual idiotic questions he looked at me as if I were a moron and didn't answer. The only time he talked was when I asked him what the result would be and he said 'I always win.'"

"Well if he wouldn't or couldn't talk, his manager could. You could have got some gen instead of this tripe. I think you must be crazy using valuable space to practise

your prose style in. And all about a great dumb buck nigger too."

Dobson said, "He's not dumb and he's not a buck nigger. I tell you there is something unusual, something you can't analyse about him. He's not like any other fighter, black or white. I've never come up against anything like it."

McLaughlin said viciously, "For God's sake, Dobson, what's wrong with you? Have you turned queer and fallen for the nigger? He's a phenomenal fighter from all accounts and that's all that interests us. Now do get a sensible piece done and talk about his left hook this time, not his aura."

Dobson turned to go but McLaughlin spoke again, "By the way, how did he strike you in his work-out?"

"Couldn't really tell. He took it very easily and only occasionally let a punch go. But I wouldn't like to be his sparring partner."

"Sloane doesn't stand an earthly, I suppose?"

Dobson shrugged. "It's a funny game. Sloane's very tough and he can punch. According to the book he doesn't stand one chance in fifty, but anything can happen in boxing. A collision of heads, a cut eye, a pulled leg muscle and it's all over."

Dobson went back to his desk and sat smoking, held in the soft yet inexorable embrace of profound inertia. McLaughlin had not been entirely wrong when he had suggested that Dobson had been drunk when he had written the feature on Babe Simon. Not drunk but not sober either, Dobson reflected as he reconstructed in his mind the events of the previous day. On his return from Windsor he had had a couple of beers in the Plough, standing at the bar still dazed from the extraordinary impact of Simon's personality, the curious impression of strength and peace which could only be possessed by someone who had exorcised fear and desire from his world. He had felt a bit dizzy, and putting it down to

lack of food had gone to a café and ordered egg and chips; but the smell of frying, the stained and grimy tablecloths, had murdered appetite before the food appeared. So he had eaten a little bread and butter, drunk a cup of strong tea and then made his way to the office. He had felt a bit tight when he had written the story: a little light-headed and curiously exhilarated. But it could not have been the beer: lack of food or not, two beers would never have affected him perceptibly. He had gone home early and on his arrival had felt a sudden overwhelming tiredness and had gone straight to bed. He remembered waking that morning and trying to recall without success what he had written the previous evening, then hurrying down to the office and reading over the article and reacting with a mixture of astonishment, embarrassment and pride. It was really a good piece, he thought, by any standards, though he was prepared to grant that there was an element of justice in McLaughlin's outraged protests. The thing would not appeal to many readers, particularly those whose habit it was to turn first to the sports page before even glancing at the front-page headlines, and it was, after all, the tastes of this audience that ought by rights to condition the content and style of his contributions.

Though he could not have told McLaughlin so, he inwardly disclaimed much of the responsibility for the feature. It had been written almost unconsciously in a state of mind that he could not remember ever having experienced before. McLaughlin could talk about being drunk or mad but it had been a very strange and exciting thing that had happened to him. He could not now describe the impressions made upon him by his meeting with Simon; something of it was recorded in the article. You couldn't write about him as though he were just another fighter, even a great one. There was something more to him than that. He had qualities that were above the norm; you sensed the absence of all the degrading

and animal impulses common to the average run of humanity. In the harmony of his physical beauty there was a peculiar quality, an absence of obvious sexual magnetism as though he were indeed a statue—a Rodin done in ebony.

Dobson marshalled his undisciplined thoughts with a conscious effort and was aware of faint embarrassment. It seemed that McLaughlin might be right after all. Perhaps he was going crazy. Perhaps Simon was just a splendid animal: his lack of curiosity and his reluctance to talk were probably symptomatic of an arrested mind.

Dobson told himself that he would have to snap out of this lethargy and romantic miasma and get down to some solid work or he would be finding himself looking for a new job. But these strictures carried no weight of conviction: the prospect of losing his job did not alarm him but evoked a mild current of anticipatory excitement. Away from the grind of Fleet Street perhaps he would be able to get down to some worthwhile work. Perhaps a novel or a play.

Then without warning the comfortable warmth and flattering colours of his reverie were dispelled by the chill, metallic light of actuality, and he remembered how difficult he found it already to make ends meet and how terribly easy the paper would find it to replace him: he was no longer a young man and his reputation was not such as to make other newspapers eager for his services.

He pushed back his chair and went to the cloakroom, where he washed his hands and face in cold water. Then he returned to his desk and inserted a sheet of paper in his typewriter and began to hit the keys as though the machine had insulted him.

CHAPTER VI

"HULLO, kid. Glad you looked in," Gregory said. "Wanted to see you specially."

Johnny Blake skipped out of the way of a swinging punch-bag and joined his manager. "Hullo, Mr. Gregory," he said.

There was an air of suppressed excitement about him. His eyes were over-bright and face tense: it seemed that some kind of powerful spring was being held down within him precariously and dangerously.

Gregory, jovial and newly shaved, his great jowl powdered and exuding a faint perfume, noticed the boy's tension with misgivings. Nervous, he told himself. Another of those damned thoroughbreds that don't last the course. He said, "How do you feel about tonight, son?"

"Fine," said Johnny with a little too much emphasis, grinning confidently.

"Good boy. It's a walkover for you, a walkover. Now listen. I won't be able to get along tonight. I've got to go to a dinner: I'm seeing Isaacs there on a bit of business. Sammy will be in your corner and you'll be O.K. Not a thing to worry about. I want you to ring me up after the fight and let me know what round you put him away in. See?"

Johnny nodded.

Gregory could see that he looked disappointed and he said quickly, "I tried to put this bit of business off but you know what sort of a guy Isaacs is. You can't afford to play around with him. Of course, if I hadn't been so sure you would stop this Ellis guy I'd be with you,

business or no business, but it's just a pushover for you. Now don't forget to give me a ring after the show. You've got my number, haven't you?"

"What time will you be back from the dinner?" Johnny asked.

"Hard to say. Ten-thirty, maybe. Anyway, if I'm not in leave a message. Just say what round you did him in. You'd better go home and rest now; don't hang around the gym. If you can't sleep go to the pictures. You don't have to worry. Get the right temperament. Ever seen Dave Sloane before a fight? Sleeps like a baby. No nerves. That's the way you have to be if you're going to be a champion. Have a light meal about five. Poached eggs if your ma's got any."

Johnny hovered about the gym for a few minutes until Gregory, noticing that he had not left, said peremptorily, "Off you go, kid. Remember what I told you. Get the right temperament."

Blake went out into the street and walked slowly without direction, his hands thrust deep in his pockets and overcoat collar turned up against the grey and irritable wind.

Foreboding was present in the air he breathed, dry on his palate and prickly on the soles of his feet; he felt it stirring slightly in his bowels and oozing clammy from palms of clenched hands. The right temperament, Gregory had said. It was easy to talk. You couldn't help the way you were made. He had always been like this immediately before a fight: scared sick. It wasn't fear of being hurt, because he felt just the same even if he was certain that he could beat his opponent without the slightest difficulty. It was something to do with the crowd. Perhaps fear of being made to look silly—sprawling on the canvas, legs and arms waving in the air while the referee counted you out; carried back to your corner, head lolling to one side, mouth open and eyes glazed, like a ventriloquist's doll. It had never happened to him: but there had to be a first time for everything. Perhaps it would be better once he

had actually taken a knockout. They said you didn't feel anything or know anything about it; but what about afterwards, when you came round? You wouldn't be able to look anyone in the face.

He tried to dismiss the ugly thoughts and images that pressed insistently into his mind, and reassure himself that all would be well. He had seen Ellis fight and he knew that he could beat him. There was nothing to worry about, he told himself. In a few hours it would all be over and he would be another rung up the ladder. He would do as Gregory suggested—go to the pictures. That would take his mind off the evening. He had about five hours to spare before he need be at the Mile End stadium: plenty of time to see a film, go home and pick up his kit and get to the hall. He knew that there was no question of his being able to eat anything. The idea of food caused a spasm of revulsion in his stomach.

He went to the Odeon Cinema in Tottenham Court Road and after a while became sufficiently interested in the acts of violence and fictitious passion that were being displayed on the screen as to forget his nervousness.

When he emerged from the cinema it was dark and the pavements were crowded with workers returning to their homes. Winter was cold and sharp in his nostrils and he hurried towards the warmth of the Underground and descended the escalator to the congested platform. He was unable to find a seat in his train and had to stand for the whole of the journey, swaying with the motion of the carriage, drawing in the tobacco-tainted air as he breathed.

He thought of Gregory's advice to rest and it seemed that he could feel the strength flowing from his limbs, the beginning of the defeat that would be completed at night with him spreadeagled on the canvas, hardly conscious of the crowd yelling their approval of his victor and their contempt for himself. And he thought of Ellis, his opponent. How had he spent the day? Probably in bed.

Perhaps he did not suffer from nerves; just looked on the fight as another job of work. He probably had the right temperament.

Looking at his fellow passengers, the shop assistants making their plans for the evening and the older clerks and workmen absorbed in their newspapers, Johnny felt for them a curious mixture of envy and contempt. One part of him, the timorous, uncertain spirit that could at times flame into huge and explicit fear, coveted their obvious equanimity; but the ambitious and adventurous part of his nature and his physical vanity fought hard to struggle with the importunate and despicable other self. These people, he told himself, were only half alive. The readers of newspapers; the pen pushers and shop walkers; their idea of excitement was a trip to the theatre or football match. He was not of their kind. He was the sort of person they read about in their newspapers, whom they admired from a distance without understanding; the sort of person who injected what little colour and vitality there was into their lives. He would not change places with them for anything. He had a part-time job at present at Lester's garage, but that would not be for long. As soon as he was in the big money—another eighteen months or so—he would be able to pack the job in. Have a flash car and people pointing at him in the streets. Women too . . . momentarily and disturbingly an image of Tina's subtly smiling face imposed itself upon his vision but he thrust it aside. Women were poison to fighters: everybody said so. Weakened you.

When he reached home he found his older brother, Ron, seated at the table in the small living-room eating sausages and mashed potatoes and drinking tea from an enormous china mug.

"Hullo, Dempsey," Ron greeted him, grinning, "want your tea?"

Johnny took off his coat and sat down at the table and shouted, "Ma!"

Mrs. Blake came from the kitchen. She was short, and round her ample waist was tied a coarse apron. Her sleeves were rolled up showing forearms as brawny as a navvy's and her features had been shaped by adversity into a determined and slightly pugnacious mould, but her eyes, dark and lively, promised kindness and humour.

She said, "Do you want some sausages?"

"Just a cup of tea," Johnny said.

"You'd better eat something."

"I'm not hungry. Just want a cup of tea."

"Jittery?" Ron inquired without great concern.

"Course not. I never eat before a fight," Johnny said shortly.

A few moments later Irene, the youngest member of the family, returned from her work at the local branch of a chain store. She was only seventeen but looked older. Her hair was dyed blonde and it was apparent that she used make-up not for the purpose of assisting nature but in order to shame it. Despite her tender age her eyes had the slightly concussed look of the screen wanton, but this, like most of her physical characteristics, might have been the result of assiduous study of her favourite film actresses.

As she passed, Johnny said disagreeably, "Phew! What a stink!"

She stopped and eyed him with an expression of dislike that could hardly have been assumed. "What did you say?" she demanded.

"I said 'what a stink.' That scent or whatever it is."

"That's you all over. Common. A common corner boy." She paused, her eyes no longer dazed but stabbing anger as she struggled to find the damaging phrase. "I hope you get your head knocked off tonight," she said at length.

Mrs. Blake reappeared. "What's wrong, my girl? At it again?"

Ron said, "Our Johnny's a bit nervy, that's what's up.

He's taking it out on other people." And he returned to his meal, eating with methodical relish.

Johnny sipped his tea and watched his brother morosely, feeling again the ambivalent sensation of envy and contempt that he had experienced in the train. Then he rose from the table, ducked under the line of washing that hung across the room, and went up to the bedroom which he shared with Ron. The case containing his boxing kit was standing ready packed on the chair by the side of the large double bed. He opened the lid of the case to make sure that everything was there: boxing boots, socks, jock-strap, trunks, gum shield, towel and dressing-gown. Everything was in order. From the case rose the faint aroma of massage oils, the smell of every fighter's dressing-room or training quarters, aggravating his anticipatory and nervous excitement. It seemed that he could already hear the noise of the crowd, the shuffling of feet on the canvas, the brazen command of the bell. The small room, with its sombre wallpaper and photographs of relatives from an earlier and more dignified age, was suddenly haunted by incongruous shapes of bared muscles, straining backs, white-sweatered torsos, the shabby splendour of the M.C.'s tails.

Johnny snapped the case shut and carried it down to the living-room. He put on his coat and called in the direction of the kitchen, "So long, Ma. See you later."

"Good luck, kid," Ron said.

Johnny grinned at him and went out into the street and found that, despite the cold air, he was sweating. His mouth was dry and he felt slightly sick.

'Oh, Christ,' he thought, 'it will always be like this. I've not got the temperament. I've a bloody good mind not to turn up.'

But he walked without faltering to the place where he would catch the bus to the stadium.

"Cheerio, Johnny. See you Monday." The wizened mutilated face of Sammy Long peered up at him, squinting affectionately and disconcertingly. "You boxed like a champion. That left hook was a honey—a honey."

"Cheerio, Sammy," Johnny said and watched the old fighter turn and shuffle across the road towards the Bricklayer's Arms.

Johnny smiled to himself in the darkness and began to walk slowly away from the entrance to the stadium.

He felt curiously strong and calm, filled with a sense of power and invincibility. Ellis had scarcely touched him and had been as easy to hit as a punch-ball.

It had been like taking candy from a baby. He felt a slight stirring of sympathy for his opponent, whom he had knocked out in the second round. The poor so-and-so must be feeling pretty browned off, he thought. But it was all in the game. Somebody had to lose and there had been no doubt who was the master. Ellis had been outclassed.

'Nobody could have beaten me tonight,' he told himself with absolute assurance, 'nobody.'

Then he remembered his earlier nervousness almost with disbelief. He was not old enough to understand that it is almost as difficult to believe in the reality of past fear as it is to believe in past love, that one is apt to dismiss them both as illusory once the tangible symptoms have disappeared. Johnny found it easy to convince himself that he had not been really afraid, merely overexcited.

The next fight would be different, he thought. He would not get himself into a state over it, for really there was nothing to worry about. He had proved that when his left hook had sent Ellis to the canvas for the count. He reconstructed the event in imagination.

Ellis had sent a right to his body which he had evaded: his opponent had lost balance for a second and Johnny had cracked him on the chin with a short hook. Just like

that. Then the referee had held up his hand and the crowd had cheered and Sammy in his corner had danced up and down chuckling with excitement.

He flexed his muscles and breathed deeply and a confused, pleasant dream of the future unfolded itself before him; an agglomeration of headlines arose; autograph books, public introductions from the ring on big fight nights, whispering and nudges as he passed, and again, making their surreptitious entrance unobserved, women. But it was not difficult to dismiss them from his microcosm in the glow of immediate triumph; preoccupied with plans for his future he could not seriously think of anything that might interfere with his reaching his goal, which was no less than a world title. Women, he told himself mechanically, were poison.

Then he remembered that he had to 'phone Mr. Gregory. Gregory would be pleased, he thought. Ellis had beaten some good boys, and to have knocked him out as he had done was quite a performance.

He walked on until he came to a telephone kiosk. Inside he looked at his reflection in the mirror above the instrument and saw there was a very slight bruise on his cheek bone. He pressed it gently with his forefinger and it felt quite tender. Odd that he could not remember the blow that had caused it, he thought. But that was the only mark he bore from the fight.

Suddenly he realised with a mild shock of guilt and embarrassment that he had been staring at his reflection for some time, staring at himself, tightening his lips and looking tough. Then he dialled Gregory's number. He heard the bell ringing at the other end of the line and felt pride and excitement tightening in his diaphragm. The old man would be tickled to hear about tonight, he thought with pleasure.

There was a click and the regular buzzing in his ear stopped: a low voice said, "Yes?" It was a woman's voice—Mrs. Gregory's.

He was unreasonably dismayed and stammered as he spoke. "Is that—Mr. Gregory there, please?"

"Who's speaking?"

"Blake," he said. "Johnny Blake."

"No, he's not in. He said you might 'phone. How did you get on tonight?" Her voice was soft and very pleasant; not a bit like his sister's or any of the girls he knew.

He said, "I won. Second round."

"How nice," she said, but he did not think she sounded very excited about it.

There was a pause and he said, "Well, you'll tell Mr. Gregory then."

"Oh yes, I'll tell him."

Another pause.

Johnny said awkwardly, "Well, goodbye, Mrs. Gregory."

She said, "Why do you call me Mrs. Gregory?"

He was aware of an unfamiliar tingling sensation in his spine and his throat became constricted, making speech difficult. He said, "I beg your pardon?"

"Why do you call me Mrs. Gregory?"

He was terribly confused. He was sure that it was Tina's voice yet she wanted to know why he called her Mrs. Gregory. "I don't know," he said, "I mean—well, that's who you are, isn't it?"

"No," came the calm answer, "I'm not Mrs. Gregory."

"But—you are—are you—Tina?" He mumbled the name in agony of embarrassment.

"Yes, Johnny, I'm Tina."

Johnny was becoming as acutely conscious of her presence as if she were in the kiosk with him, standing close, her scent in his nostrils. He felt desperately bewildered and excited. He said hoarsely, "I don't know what you mean."

"I'm sorry. I didn't hear you."

He repeated, "I don't know what you mean. If you're not Mrs. . . ." He broke off.

She said, "Listen. Why not come round here one evening and I'll tell you all about it? Tuesday, say, for dinner."

"Thank you . . ." he began, then broke off; "But Mr. Gregory will be in Brighton."

"That's right."

He thought he heard her laughing quietly. He opened his mouth to speak, then realised that he was too shocked and puzzled to say anything. He heard her voice say, "Eight o'clock Tuesday. Goodbye, Johnny." And the line expired with a click.

Johnny left the kiosk as dazed as any punch-drunk fighter. What did she mean, she wasn't Mrs. Gregory? Of course she was. He had heard Mr. Gregory call her the missus. Was she trying on some game with him? He remembered vividly her sitting by his side before the television, and the pressure of her leg against his own. Could it be that she fancied him? Surely not. She was class and a smashing looker. Anybody would be lucky to get her. Surely she couldn't fancy him. But you never could tell with women. He had heard some funny things. Mayfair duchesses paying blokes: they were supposed to fancy boxers too, and Gregory was very old and fat. You never could tell.

And what a few moments earlier would have seemed quite impossible to Johnny happened without his noticing it: as he walked slowly along he completely forgot that he had been in the ring that night; he forgot the elation and self-confidence that his victory had brought; he forgot his grandiose plans for the future, he even forgot that he was a professional boxer, remembering only that he was a man, a man who it seemed might possess the power to attract to him a woman as beautiful and superior and mysterious as Mrs. Gregory—as Tina.

CHAPTER VII

DAVE SLOANE, the middleweight champion of Great Britain and the British Empire, was a type of professional boxer rare in these days when the game has become so highly commercialised that pugilists are forced to resort to all kinds of activity not remotely connected with their true business of fighting in order to increase their 'box office' value. Champion or near champion boxers are publicised in much the same way as film actors; their eccentricities are made much of in the popular Press; we learn with hardly any surprise that a leading American heavyweight trains on a diet of beer and cigars; that a welterweight champion reads Proust in his bath; that it was once the ambition of a leading French featherweight to dance in classical ballet. Boxers appear on the music-halls and sing sentimental ballads; their training quarters are thrown open to the public (though usually the public sees only a fairly convincing pantomime and the serious training is done in private).

Handsome features are a tremendous asset to a boxer and might easily win him a film contract: small moustaches often adorn the upper lips of fighters, a phenomenon the sight of which would have shaken the old National Sporting Club to its foundations.

But Sloane was of an older régime. He was not handsome and had never heard of Proust. Only a very few of his close intimates had heard him sing and they were unanimous in their refusal to allow him the slightest talent; he was a teetotaller and non-smoker and the idea of men dancing on the stage filled him with horrified

embarrassment. He was a tough, honest fighter who had learned many tricks in a long and arduous career and had developed a right hook that, if it landed on an opponent's jaw, would inevitably knock him senseless for a minute or so. Outside the ring he was taciturn, clumsy, very kindly and rather sentimental beneath his craggy surface. He could not even excite public attention with domestic scandal, for he had been married for nine years, had two small boys aged seven and four, and intended remaining married to Agnes, his present wife, until he died.

So attached to his small family was he that Sid Gregory had been unable to persuade him to leave his home and set up a training camp in some more suitable place than the small London gymnasium to which he travelled daily. The arrangement to go to Brighton for the final week of his training was a compromise achieved by Gregory not without considerable trouble.

On the Sunday before the day he was to make the trip to Brighton Sloane was settled comfortably in an arm-chair in the sitting-room of the small house he had bought in Richmond. A small pile of newspapers lay by the side of his chair and the *Sunday Echo* was open on his lap; but he was not reading it, because he was fast asleep.

His wife came into the room and the sound of the closing door awakened him. He stretched and groaned, then sat up straight and shook his head like a dog emerging from water. Agnes took the chair opposite him and began to knit. He watched her for a few moments, then said, waving a hand towards the newspapers, "Seems I'm going to be murdered." He grinned comfortably.

She said, "You shouldn't read them things."

"Why not?"

She shrugged without answering.

"Think they'll make me windy?" he asked, grinning more widely.

She said, "You're too stupid to be windy. You wouldn't be scared if you were fighting King Kong."

He looked at her with admiration. She had a sharp tongue had Agnes, he thought. Very quick. He said, "Listen to this . . ." and began reading from the paper. "Babe Simon, the silent killer from the jungle, is to receive our own Dave Sloane for his next sacrifice. People are asking 'What has Dave done to deserve this fate?' The black panther has severely mauled the best that the United States of America and the Continent can offer, so what possible chance does Sloane stand? The fight will be like a race between an old spaniel and a trained whippet—except that for the British champion the result will not be merely ignominious but decidedly painful."

He threw the paper aside and picked up another. "This one says the Board of Control ought to forbid it. Hopeful lot, aren't they?"

His wife lowered her knitting on to her lap and said fiercely, "For God's sake, Dave, stop it. You're like a damned great baby." Then she began to cry. She put her head in her hands and wept quite noiselessly.

He stared at her bent head in distressed astonishment, unable to speak or move. The clock on the mantelpiece counted the moments of her inexplicable grief; there was a numb silence like the silence after the announcement of tragic news.

He cleared his throat and said, "Agnes. Agnes, what's up, dear?" But she did not reply.

He went over to her and went down on his knees and put his arms round her. "What is it?" he said. "What is it, duckie? Everything's going to be all right. You see. You don't want to take no notice of the papers: they're always cockeyed. Listen, listen to me."

He took her by the wrist and gently uncovered her face, which was wet and reddened by the tears. He went on speaking with great earnestness. "I'm going to beat

this bloke, Agnes. I'm telling you I know it. I've got a feeling. I don't often get the feeling but I've got it this time. I'm going to knock him out. Listen. I'm dead certain of it. I've never felt more sure of a fight than this one. I'm going to lick him."

She said passionately, "I wish to God you'd give it up. Look at you. Your teeth knocked out of your head, your eyes cut open. Your ears like I don't know what. How's it going to finish if you go on? If it's not this one as half kills you it'll be some other. Give it up, Dave. Give it up when this one's over."

He frowned painfully. "You don't understand. This'll mean the title for me—the world title. And you know what that means. The big money. The really big money. I'll be getting ten, twelve thousand for a fight. Another two or three fights and we'll be fixed for the rest of our lives. The kids too. Nothing'll be too good. College and everything. Don't you see, Agnes, this is what we've been waiting for?"

"No, Dave," she said, her voice more controlled, but devoid of all feeling except hopelessness. "That's not for us. We're just ordinary people. We don't want things like that. They're for the people that's used to it, not for us."

His eyes widened and he exclaimed, half in earnest and half jocularly, "What do you mean, ordinary people? What's ordinary about all this?" His hand indicated the newspapers. "You don't get ordinary people in the papers. I'm famous, you know." He blushed with pride.

A slight smile moved on her lips and she detached her hands from his to wipe her eyes.

The smile gave him reassurance and he said quickly, patting her hand, "We're going to be all right, duckie. You see, we're going to be all right."

"Get up from there," Agnes said, "the kids'll be in in a minute. They'll wonder what you're doing down there on the rug."

Sloane rose to his feet and watched her pick up her knitting and continue her dexterous manipulation of the needles. She had her moods, he thought, but they never lasted long. She was a good old sort, the best old Dutch in the world.

An outer door slammed and he heard the loud and excited voices of his sons. One of them shouted, "Dad! Dad! Come and see what I've got."

"Noisy little bleeders," Sloane said indulgently. Agnes lifted her eyes from her knitting.

"Watch your language," she commanded sharply.

"Sorry, ducks," he answered, mechanically penitent. Everything was all right again, he told himself—Agnes was herself again.

CHAPTER VIII

THERE is perhaps no community of people with a more fiercely upheld and more inflexible code of sexual behaviour than the humblest section of the British working class. It is a code various and obscure in origin and complex in structure, and many oddly assorted elements have united to determine its nature. Its roots are planted in superstition; it has been nourished by religion and possesses a mythology of its own; and its vigour and authority in these amoral times have been maintained mainly because of its demonstrable practicability. Expediency and materialism constitute a greater part of the whole than is generally recognised.

The young man of this class is usually adamant regarding the qualification of chastity in his betrothed, and it is here that his matrimonial values are most obviously different from his middle- or upper-class contemporary. The young woman who leaves school at fourteen or fifteen years of age to work long hours in a shop or factory, denied the opportunities of preparing herself for a career in medicine, law or education, automatically makes the marriage state her aim. Her parents, too, are naturally anxious that the girl should be married off as quickly and profitably as possible, so it comes about that a poor, working-class girl's virginity is potentially of great value. Her chastity, protected from violation by her awareness of its value, by the fear of pregnancy and parental wrath (which might prove almost lethal), is further preserved by the lack of opportunity for amatory adventure. The dances she attends

are in public halls and finish at eleven or twelve o'clock; she is unlikely to know any man who might buy her dinner with expensive and potent wines, and her only experience of love is the clumsy kiss and squeeze in the dark shop doorway or at best the untutored and abortive fumbings on the domestic sofa with the young man who has received the limited sanction of parental blessing. The really promiscuous women of the poor proletariat are the natural delinquents, prostitutes and lascivious widows. The average working girl is too shrewd, too superstitious and too ignorant to take a lover before marriage.

In view of this it is not surprising that the young men, too, are sexually inexperienced, or if not actually inexperienced their knowledge is sadly distorted by their having received the worst kind of tutelage from harpies, sluts and the lowest type of prostitute, the kind who possesses the most rudimentary idea of her profession and discharges her duties in the most perfunctory and gross manner.

Johnny Blake was not yet twenty years of age and, besides the restrictions imposed by environment on his relations with women, further intercourse had been limited by his embracing the ascetism which many old-fashioned boxing-trainers consider necessary to absolute physical fitness. There had been one or two girls who had stirred his immature longings: Rose, a friend of his sister, a pert redhead with satisfying curves, but she had shown only a mild interest in him and had subsequently become engaged to a young man with a small black moustache and a powerful motor-cycle.

For a few weeks he had patronised a milk bar in the district, consuming countless milk shakes, the price of being able to watch with hopeless desire a beautiful counter assistant with raven hair, exciting Mediterranean eyes, and a dress which was cut in such a way as to reveal the division of her breasts. But she had many admirers

less inhibited than Johnny, who always lacked the courage to engage her in light banter preparatory to asking her for a date.

One Saturday evening he had met Alf Clay, and Alf had said 'let's pick up a couple of women' and had given him a little packet, but the opportunity for using its contents had never arrived and he had carried it about in his wallet for a few days until, becoming afraid that his mother might find it, he had put it down the lavatory. After that he had succeeded in sublimating sexual desire through the bitter discipline of work and training for boxing and of the actual fighting itself.

Five mornings a week he worked in the garage and spent the afternoons and most week-ends at Gregory's gymnasium. Women, he assured his friends, did not worry him.

And then came Tina.

The week-end that followed his 'phone call to the Gregory flat and Tina's invitation was a time of perplexity, excitement and anxiety that sometimes united to form a state of dreamlike unreality. He went to the gymnasium on the Saturday morning and was congratulated on his victory of Friday night. He joined in the discussions of Dave Sloane's chances in the big fight, but without his customary enthusiasm. Sunday, usually a pleasant day of good food, newspapers and sometimes the cinema in the evening, became huge with fantastic imaginings, doubts and longings; and when he realised that his dreams and vague speculations led far from the path to the world championship he was troubled by feelings of guilt almost as if he had betrayed an old friend.

On Monday afternoon he sparred at the gymnasium and found that he was hopelessly off form, mistiming his blows and being caught by counter-punches that a novice could have avoided. Sam, of course, noticed the deterioration of his performance and told him that he

was stale, that he had been training too much and was probably in need of a rest; so he returned home and went to his bedroom seeking an unattainable solitude, unattainable because he was accompanied everywhere by images evoking desire, vague resentment and guilt.

Night came, but his unease was so potent that it resisted without difficulty the offer of sleep while accepting the bizarre and fragmentary universe of dream. His brother slept by his side breathing deeply, ejecting the air in regular sighing whistles through his nostrils; and Johnny was stirred by irrational anger and impulses of sadism which he only controlled with difficulty. The morning found him tired and irritable, still haunted by the images of woman: the anonymous and acutely desirable limbs, and the face veiled by falling hair which had inhabited his sleeplessness was still beckoning from the boundaries of consciousness and was now more easily recognised as Tina. Last night he had known it was she without being able to recognise any particular physical characteristic, but daylight seemed to clarify the vision and her features moved into focus and were recognised. The febrile excitement of night was dulled by weariness and headache, and at the centre of the attraction he felt for her he became half aware of a small seed of aversion or fear.

The morning at the garage seemed very long and by lunch time he had made up his mind what to do about Tina's invitation. He would telephone her and tell her that he could not go. Then it occurred to him that all his excitement and worry had perhaps been without reasonable cause, and that it was his ignorance of the way his superiors lived that had led him to indulge in such fantastic daydreams. Perhaps, he thought, it was the normal thing for Mrs. Gregory to invite him to dinner. Perhaps she was just being polite and sociable. Then he remembered the pressure of her knee in the darkness, the look in her eyes and the sound of her voice: and his

pulses and nerves sent rapid messages of contradiction to the brain.

He did not go to the gymnasium in the afternoon but spent a long time over washing and changing into his best clothes. As he left the house he thought he saw a sad interrogation in his mother's eyes but she did not ask him anything.

Before telephoning Tina he tried to rehearse what he should say, but found it impossible because he could not foresee the way in which she would reply. At length he decided to tell her quite abruptly that something had arisen to prevent his keeping the appointment.

As he dialled the number, excitement moved in him like an infection and his hand trembled. He could hear the bell ringing in her flat. Perhaps she was not in. The bell buzzed, peremptory, urgent. No, she was not in. He would ring off; just not turn up, and say later that he had 'phoned and she had not answered.

Then there was the click of the receiver being lifted and the sound of her voice in his ear; he licked his dry lips and cleared his throat preparing to speak.

Tina lay on the divan and smoked a cigarette. The ashtray at her side was half-filled with cigarette ends, flushed crimson at their tips. She was bored. Sid had gone off to Brighton with that gorilla, Sloane. But that was not why she was bored. Sid would be more likely to increase her boredom than to alleviate it. Sometimes she thought she was a damn fool to stick with him, but her innate honesty over matters of material profit and loss insisted that she remind herself of what her life had been like before she had met Sid.

She remembered the single room in Paddington; the avaricious and hypocritical landlady, the gas fire which demanded regular and frequent shilling bribes before it would continue its inadequate services; insufficient

meals, the two bobs each way on horses that never won; the wise guys she met in the Gloucester Arms with their unkept promises and false bonhomie; the rapid descent to the level where all values other than purely mercenary ones were jettisoned, where there was no discrimination so long as the money was there. And more clearly than anything else she remembered Archie's, partly because she had spent so many hours there and partly because it had been there that she had met Sid. Why he had gone there on that occasion she could not think: she was sure he had not been before nor since. Perhaps he had just wanted a woman and somebody had taken him there. He had been with another fellow whom she could not remember much about except that he was very deferential to Sid, who was obviously the one with the money.

No, she would not care to return to Archie's: the cracked piano played by Toby the pansy (he did not play badly either): the few inches of dancing space where the drunks wanted to get hold of you and have a cheap feel, the reek of perfume and stale tobacco and drink: Miriam, Janet, Louise, ranged along the bar on high stools, their voices cracking the air like glass with shrill laughter, mouths grinning and all the time their eyes as miserable as hell. No, she'd rather die than go back.

Sid was all right. He was no glamour boy but you couldn't have everything. He played the game with her and she knew how to handle him without any trouble. There had been moments, once or twice, when he had turned a bit nasty; that time when she had met Jerry Dyson in the park and had gone to lunch with him. Sid was jealous like all men: wanted to own her, body and soul; but it was easy enough to let him think he did. She couldn't complain really.

The remains of her cigarette was added to the collection in the ashtray and she yawned and stretched voluptuously.

She switched on the radio but there was no music being broadcast so she turned it off. Boredom intensified, thickening the atmosphere like tobacco smoke, and she felt a slight headache rising inside her skull.

'A bath,' she thought. 'I'll have a bath. That will make me feel brighter. Then I can think of something to do tonight.'

Ten minutes later she was lying in the bath, her limbs caressed gently and delightfully by the warm and scented water beneath which she could see her body stretched, the long and slender legs, the tender thighs and the pubic hair stirring slightly in the miniature waves like some exotic water plant. Her hands moved to her breasts and were flattered by their firmness and symmetry. She closed her eyes contentedly: she was beautiful, very beautiful and warm and relaxed. There was not much a bath could not put right.

The sudden clamour of the telephone bell startled her.

"Damn," she said aloud. "Who in God's name can that be?" She waited a few seconds before leaving the warm and friendly water, conscious of its attraction growing as the telephone called harshly for attention; then, with a little groan, she pulled herself out of the bath, put on her bathing robe and slippers and trailed into the lounge.

Picking up the receiver she said in a not very friendly voice, "Yes, who is it?" . . . Who? . . . Oh yes, Johnny. How are you? Sweet of you to 'phone me. . . . What's that? . . . Oh yes, of course, tonight. Don't be late. . . . What? . . . Oh, don't be silly, you must put it off. We had a date. Who is it? Your girl friend? She can spare you for one evening. . . . What's that you say? I can't hear you very well: have you got a cold? . . . All right, Johnny, eight o'clock sharp. Bye-bye."

She replaced the receiver and smiled thoughtfully. 'Lord,' she thought. 'I must have been tight. Oh yes,

Friday. Sid was out at that dinner and I drank all that Pym's.' She began to chuckle. 'Why not, anyway? He's a nice-looking boy and Sid'll never be any the wiser. He is a nice-looking boy and shy, very shy.'

Still smiling she went back to the bathroom, but she no longer felt any desire to get back into the water.

CHAPTER IX

'I'LL have one more,' Dobson told himself. 'Once more and this is the last.'

"Same again?" said the barman.

Dobson nodded, pushing his glass across the bar to be filled.

Once more and this the last. Othello. Simon. Babe Simon. What a damn fool name, Babe. Some babe. The greatest fighter of all time at any weight. Christ, he was beautiful, yes, beautiful. That head and those shoulders, like a statue. And when he moved his left lead, black lightning. A good phrase, black lightning. But he wouldn't talk: not a damn word. Just looked at you as if you were trying to sell him a sun-tan lotion or something. Perhaps he was just dumb, a dumb buck nigger. When he moved he was something more than human: they talked about grace, dancers. They hadn't seen Simon. And he never talked—like Greta Garbo. Poor old Sloane, not a chance, not a snowhell's chance in—not a snowball's chance in hell. But you never knew; anything could happen. Heads cracked together, a cut eye and Babe's your uncle. Bob's your . . . Sloane wasn't a bad 'un mind you. He could punch, oh, yes, he could punch all right. You never knew. But Othello was different. . . . *Out, out, black candle.* No, what the hell was it? *Put out the light and then put out the light.* Simon would put old Sloane's light out all right. Spark out. Out for the count. Poor bastard. *If I quench thee, thou flaming minister.* Flaming minister, Presbyterian, flaming parson.

Dobson became aware that he was giggling and stopped abruptly. He drank his whisky and asked for another.

The barman seemed doubtful whether to serve him or not but finally he brought the drink. Dobson thanked him carefully, then surveyed the other occupants of the bar. There was no one there he wished to talk to. A few dreary subs and reporters on night shift all talking shop. To hell with them.

Will you come to bed, my lord? Aye, Desdemona. But Othello didn't say that. He did her in. Real *News of the World* stuff. Smothered her, poor little bitch. *Sing all a green willow must be my garland.* Great man Shakespeare. Not queer, shouldn't think. Or maybe the best of both worlds. Different in those days . . .

A voice broke into his reverie and he started almost guiltily.

"Oh, well, Dobson, how's the noble art?"

He peered up at Feltham, the lobby correspondent, who was smiling, infuriatingly supercilious.

He said, "That's a damn silly question." His voice sounded as if he were speaking through a fairly loose bandage and it annoyed him to think that he was at a disadvantage.

Feltham's eyebrows rose in assumed and amused surprise. "Well, well," he said, "what have you been celebrating?"

"Honest Iago," said Dobson indistinctly.

"I beg your pardon?"

Dobson grinned with cunning, "Never mind," he said, waving an elaborately careless hand.

"I think you've had a drop too much," Feltham said. "Why not take a cab home?"

"Have a drink," Dobson replied, surprised at his own magnanimity.

Feltham looked doubtful. "Well, are you sure you can stand another?"

"Certainly. . . . It is the cause, my soul."

"Why so Elizabethan?"

Dobson looked at him with surprise. "You know that?"

"Of course. Why shouldn't I?"

"I don't know. You don't look as if you'd read anything except *The Times*."

"Dear me! What have I done to incur such displeasure?"

Dobson bought drinks, the barman serving him with only the slightest hesitation, apparently reassured by the presence of Feltham.

"Cheers," Feltham said, and Dobson raised his glass in reply, making the disconcerting discovery that he no longer disliked the lobby correspondent. "It's an odd thing," he confided, "but I never used to like you."

"I'm sorry about that."

"Oh no, it's all right now. I like you all right now. Have a drink?"

"Look here, I honestly think you've had enough, Dobson. How long have you been at it?"

"Once more and this the last."

"All right, but let me get them." Feltham bought two more whiskys. "By the way, you haven't answered my question. Why Othello?"

Dobson blinked at him uncomprehendingly. "What?" he said. "What's that?"

"Why are you quoting Othello?" he repeated.

Dobson said casually, "I met him last week. Windsor."

"How extraordinary."

"Yes, it *was* extraordinary. He . . ." Dobson began to speak but found the effort of producing coherent speech too much. He emptied his glass and said, "Have a drink? One for the road. One for flaming minister."

Feltham began to look seriously alarmed and exchanged a warning glance with the barman.

"Same again," said Dobson. "Same again for the minister," and he grinned foolishly.

"Sorry, sir," the barman said, "you've had enough."

Dobson scowled, without looking very intimidating.

“What the hell you mean, enough? Enough. Who’s had enough?”

“Come along,” Feltham said sharply, taking him by the arm. “Don’t be a fool.”

Dobson shook the hand away and turned red and belligerent eyes on Feltham. “Who’s a fool?” he said thickly. “What you mean, fool?”

Slowly and distinctly Feltham said, “You’ve drunk more than enough. You can’t get any more so come with me and I’ll put you in a taxi home. If you don’t come with me these people will simply throw you out. A policeman will find you in the gutter and arrest you. Take your choice.”

Dobson discarded his mask of truculence and agreed. “All right. Gutter’s no good. Police no good. Taxi. Home to Julie. Poor old Julie.”

Feltham went out to find a taxi. When he returned he found that his colleague had passed out and had been stretched out on one of the long benches which lined the walls of the saloon. With the aid of the barman he was able to get Dobson into the taxi, having first discovered his address from his pocket book. He gave the driver instructions and climbed into the cab and settled himself by the side of his now insensible companion.

“Poor old Julie,” he echoed, “whoever she may be.” Then half to himself and with theatrical irony:

“The lethargy must have his quiet course
And—”

No, what was it?

“If not—”

That was it:

“If not he foams at the mouth and by and by
Breaks out to savage madness.”

While Dobson was lying in profound and very noisy slumber, having been put to bed by Feltham who had

been discreetly and charmingly sympathetic to Julie, Johnny Blake was also in bed; but he was not sleeping, nor was the figure curled soft and warm by his side, head rested in the crook of his arm, that of his brother Ron. It was, of course, Tina. She was sleeping peacefully, her regular breathing feathering his bare shoulder. His arm ached a little from the strain of keeping it perfectly immobile so as not to disturb her sleep. But it was a discomfort gratefully accepted. He was bewildered from the events of the evening and he was trying to piece them together into a whole which would offer some acceptable explanation of his present situation.

When he had arrived at the flat Tina had produced a meal which, like everything else about the evening, had been unusually and unexpectedly pleasant. After the meal she had offered him drinks and cigarettes which he had refused uncomfortably, aware of her slightly amused expression. Conversation had not proved so difficult as he had anticipated, for she had seemed able to keep up a continual flow of amusing and irreverent chatter, and she had asked him questions about himself which had been easy to answer.

He had discovered that despite her beauty and elegance she was not really so different from people of his own kind, and when she had switched on the radio and suggested that they dance, the entire aspect of their immature relationship had undergone a sudden and, for him, intoxicating change.

Johnny was a good dancer and holding her in his arms, moving gracefully and intricately to the music's soft persuasion, he had felt a gradual sense of power and confidence growing within him; the contact of their bodies, her remarkable lightness and the scent which thrilled his nostrils and stirred his blood had all conspired to produce an effect very close to that of being slightly drunk on the rarest of wines.

He could not remember for how long they had danced

when at the end of a tango she had remained in his arms and he had found himself kissing her. The kiss itself he had to admit had been rather disappointing; he realised just how inept he must have seemed to her when he considered the change resulting from the subsequent lessons she had given him. He did not think that their going to bed had been the result of suggestion or invitation; in fact he could not accurately remember how they had made the journey from the divan to the bedroom, and from that moment all that had happened was informed by an elusive quality which made detail impossible for the memory to grasp. Only images a sense of the lingering reverberations of touch and echoes of sound remained, most tenuously related, weaving a bewildering and delightful pattern which would not stay still and focused beneath retrospective scrutiny.

Johnny was surprised, almost afraid, at the intensity and complexity of his feelings. He felt gratitude and tenderness, triumph and power, warring inside him for predominance, and he became aware of the gradual resurrection of physical desire, and with almost equal potency the need to articulate, to communicate to her in an extra-physical sense something of the magic that he was experiencing, but words eluded him. The kind of phrase that had expressed his attitude to the milk-bar assistant echoed miserably and sacrilegiously in his ears. A smasher, a nice piece of goods, a beauty all right, lovely bit of stuff; such words had no connection with Tina any more than did the ecstatically and inextricably confused moments of scent, darkness, touch and illumination refer back to the whispered jokes in the billiards hall, the cheap and garish magazines read in secrecy, the small brightly coloured packet flushed down the lavatory.

She was beautiful. Fragments of speech surfaced his consciousness, first heard perhaps from the celluloid lips of the screen lovers or read in his sister's magazines and novelettes. *I love you, my darling, my dearest, I'm crazy*

about you. I love you, my own dear, sweet, precious love. Let me hold you close: stay in my arms for ever. He sighed aloud. However inadequate, these words were the prefabricated and exoteric poetry of his kind, and did something to ease the ache to communicate, to crystallise and pin down the nebulous and exquisite moments.

He felt her head move against his arm and he stiffened, holding his breath. Her head moved again; then she said something quite incomprehensible in a drowsy murmur.

He did not answer, thinking that perhaps she was talking in her sleep.

But again she spoke, and though her voice still sounded warm and blurred by sleep the words were quite recognisable. "You asleep, Johnny?"

"No," he said, tightening his arm about her.

She wriggled closer to him and he kissed the top of her head. She made little noises of pleasure and comfort. He placed a finger under her chin and lifted her face to his and kissed her mouth. Flicker of sweet tongue against his own and sudden clinging of warm soft limbs made passion rise to his brain like fumes and he muttered hoarse endearments into her ear.

She pushed him gently from her and said, "Listen, darling. You'll have to be out of here pretty early, you know. Don't want anyone to see you leave."

The words were as unexpected and unpleasant as cold water and he relaxed his embrace involuntarily. He could not imagine how it was that she could not be feeling the same delirious excitement and pleasure that cancelled all mundane considerations, how she could be calmly contemplating his early departure with such equanimity. Desire was usurped by misery, and the first stirrings of anger began.

Tina must have sensed his reaction to her words for she pulled herself close to him and said, "What's the matter, silly boy? I was only thinking of you. You see, you will be tired tomorrow if you don't get some sleep."

“Nothing’s the matter,” he said, and could hear his own voice unfamiliar, forced and without tone or any feeling except resentment. “Nothing’s the matter. I’ll get out before it’s light.”

She said in husky and practised tones, “Kiss me, darling.”

He hesitated, holding on to the proud anger that pain had caused, then obeyed, at first reluctantly but, as proximity began to effect its usual magic, with enthusiasm until his hurt was swallowed by the rising tide of desire and he was conscious of no other feelings than triumph and delight and a great sense of universal wonder.

CHAPTER X

"I TOLD you we should have stayed in London," Dave Sloane said, looking out of the window of the billiards room of the Star and Anchor at the rain which fell heavily and unremittingly from a sky that gave not the slightest hint of respite. "What's the sense in going to the seaside in winter? I told you that all along."

Gregory took careful aim and made his stroke. There was a click and the satisfying noise of one of the balls crashing into a pocket. He stepped back from the table, chalked his cue and moved ponderously round to make his next shot. Two of Sloane's sparring partners looked on admiringly and Hyams, the camp trainer, lay back in a leather armchair reading a picture magazine.

It was mid-afternoon, a time of somnolence and ennui aggravated by the continual descent of the rain and the opaque greyness of sky, a time when strained nerves often break, when unconsidered words are spoken and actions performed which often bring subsequent regret. Sloane lounged away from the window and stared moodily at his manager, who was preparing to pot another snooker ball.

"Like kids," he said in disgust. "Pushing balls about on a table with a bit of stick. You can do that in London just as good as you can here. Sea air. Lot of ruddy air I've had."

Gregory completed his shot and said, "Go and have a lie down, Dave. Read the paper or something. That's what you're here for, a rest."

"I'd get a lot better rest at home."

"Now listen, for Pete's sake, Dave. Don't start getting

nervy. Just take it easy. Tomorrow the weather will clear up and you'll be able to do some work on the beach. Get good sea air in your lungs. Nobody ever trained for a world title fight in London. Never been heard of."

Sloane, still grumbling, left for his room and the snooker game continued for half an hour, after which time the players began to be oppressed by the grey weight of the afternoon. Hyams, the trainer, was fast asleep.

One of the sparring partners said, "Dave seems a bit browned off, don't he, Sid? Think he's got the wind up?"

"No," Gregory said, "he's always like this when he's away from his wife and kids. No, he's not got the wind up. He thinks he's going to lick Simon."

"He's about the only one that does then," the fighter said grinning.

Gregory said thoughtfully, "Funnier things have happened. How's he been shaping with you?"

"Same as usual. Good punch but not fast enough."

"Yeah. But then he never was a gymnasium fighter. He's always at his best on the big night."

The sparring partner still looked dubious but he did not pursue the subject. Gregory put down his cue and said, "Well, I don't know about you boys but I think I'll go and get a bit of shut-eye myself. See you later."

He climbed the stairs to his room, feeling the depression of the day invading him like a damp mist. He sat on the bed and looked at the framed photograph of Tina which stood on the dressing-table. She was a cute kid, he thought, a cute kid. For a moment he wished that he had brought her with him to Brighton, but he knew that he could not have done so. Women had no place in a fighter's training camp, particularly women like Tina.

When the big fight was over they would have a holiday together. Paris, maybe, or Cannes. He could take her anywhere without being ashamed of her: she had class. When she was dressed up she looked as good as any Mayfair dame, better than most. And she could do with

a holiday. He had been too busy lately to take her around very much and the poor kid liked going places. Well, he would see that she had a really swell holiday, one of the best.

He bent down and removed his shoes, then lay back on the bed and thought of the holiday they would have together. Paris. There were some swell dames in Paris too. They had something different. The way they dressed and the way they walked. Even the ordinary kids who worked in offices and shops had something different. And those clubs: the Scheherezade and the Moulin Rouge. Taking Tina was all right but a bit like taking coals to Newcastle. But not really, not when you thought about it, because he wouldn't want to trade her for anybody. Besides, he wasn't so young now: those hot little dames were nice to look at but he wasn't so young any more. The time when he was young and fit he hadn't had the dough: now he had the dough he was getting old. That was life. If you got what you wanted you got it too late. But no, he had plenty to be thankful for. Money could buy anything. Tina wouldn't have looked at him when he was a kid: the real things, the class things cost money every time.

A brisk knock at the door interrupted his reflections. "Who is it?" he called.

"Me, Dave," came the answer.

"All right, come in."

Sloane came into the bedroom and sat on the bed, looking at his manager; his face, despite its battered and furrowed appearance, looked very much like a sulky schoolboy's.

"What do you want, Dave?" Gregory asked.

"Let's go back."

"What do you mean 'go back'? You know we're not going back till Monday."

"Let's go back now. I'm sick of it here."

"Now, Dave, be reasonable. Think of your missus.

She'd think something was wrong if you turned up at home unexpected. She'd be worried. Another three days and you'll be back in Town. Then the fight and you'll be on Easy Street. Don't go and spoil your chances just because the weather ain't so hot."

Sloane said obstinately, "I can't see any good in this. The gym at home is as good as the gym here. There ain't no sea air except as would give you pneumonia. I'm going back."

Gregory sat up quickly. Despite the fleshiness and pallor of his face it suddenly took on a formidable, almost menacing, aspect. "You're not going anywhere, Dave. You're staying right here. You know damned well no fighter stays with his wife when he's in training. I've got as much to lose and to gain as you have, and I'm going to see you go into that ring as fit as you possibly can be. Get that?"

Sloane's eyes fell away from the hard scrutiny of Gregory and it seemed that he was quite discomfited, then he looked up and said with a strangely shrewd grin, "*You* don't think I'm going to lick Simon."

Gregory was caught completely off guard. "What?" he said, floundering. "What do you mean? What do you mean, not beat Simon?"

"You think he'll give me a hiding. You think that like all the others."

Gregory stood up, an expression of incredulity and indignation on his face. "Well, I never thought one of my boys would say a thing like that about me." He remained standing, his eyes wide with outraged shock. But Sloane watched him steadily, his expression unaltered.

"Dave," Gregory went on, his voice vibrant with hurt sincerity, "if I thought you were going to get a beating I would not allow you to get into that ring, believe me. You know—you've heard me say a thousand times we can lick him."

"Yes, you said it all right but you didn't believe it. I

know I can lick him but nobody else does. I'll tell you why. I watched the newsreel of that fight of his with the Italian. Six times I saw it and I'll tell you something. He slips a left lead *inside*, see. Inside nearly every time. He's good all right, but I'll get him. He'll slip inside my left and he'll be right on to the right hook. I'm going to knock him out." -He stood up and grinned, then he moved towards the door.

"Just a minute, Dave," Gregory said, taking his sleeve. "I didn't like what you said. You know I believe in you, don't you?"

Sloane paused and looked at his manager intently, then he said, "I don't know what you believe in, Sid."

"But listen," Gregory appealed, pulling him back as he reached out for the door handle, "you're not going to do anything crazy, are you? I mean you're going to stay here?"

"Yes, don't worry. I'm staying."

The door closed behind him and Gregory sat on the bed. He was completely bewildered. What had happened to Sloane? Had he gone mad? Maybe he was punch-drunk. That was a funny grin he had on his face: he looked mad. He had taken some awful beatings in the past: perhaps they were taking effect now. But what he had said was sound all right. He had spotted Gregory's own doubt in his power to win quickly enough. He hadn't been easy to fool. And that stuff about the newsreel. Perhaps he had got something there. He was a wily old devil in the ring and he hadn't had all those fights without learning a trick or two and his right hand was dynamite. Suppose he did pull it off, supposing he kayoed Simon.

"Jeeze," said Gregory aloud, overcome by the possibility. What a sensation it would be; what mugs the reporters would look. There would be demands for Sloane's services everywhere. Exhibition tours, advertising contracts, Madison Square Garden—and twenty-five per cent. for Gregory. It could mean an easy twenty

thousand quid in his pocket if he played his cards right. "Jeeze," he said again.

There was another knock and the door opened again. Sloane poked his head round: he was grinning self-consciously.

"Hullo, back again?" said Gregory, wondering what the big ape wanted this time.

"Yes, I wanted to say I didn't mean anything. You know, about you not fancying me to win. I didn't mean no offence, Sid. You and me's pals . . ." He paused awkwardly.

Gregory beamed. "Of course we are, Dave boy. Don't give it a thought. And listen. I've been thinking about what you said about Simon, about him always slipping inside the straight left. I think you've got something there. Tell you what we'll do: we'll work on that special tomorrow. You practise the move with Smiler; he's smart at slipping and ducking, so if you can catch him with it there's no reason why you shouldn't catch the nigger."

Sloane moved into the room. "Okay," he said unconcernedly, "we'll do that." Then he went on, "Listen, Sid. What do you think he's like, this nigger?"

"Oh, he's a good boy but he's only human. If you catch him with your right he'll go the way of all flesh. Don't you worry, Dave."

Sloane shook his head impatiently. "No, no, I don't mean that. I mean what's he *like*? You know, what sort of fella is he? He ain't married or anything and never talks to reporters. Most Yanks are all talk, you can't stop 'em, but this one seems different. What do you think he feels? Seems funny him and me, never met each other, and we're going to be up there trying to knock hell out of each other on Tuesday." The grooves that furrowed his brow deepened with perplexity.

Gregory looked concerned. "What's worrying you, boy? Never heard you talk like this before. Don't waste

time worrying about him. He's just the guy you're going to take the title off."

A few moments later Sloane rose to leave, obviously still pondering. Gregory opened the door for him and patted him affectionately on the back. "Don't you worry about a thing—champ," he said.

A sudden gust of wind, and rattle of rain like tiny shrapnel, shook the windows and Gregory started nervously. Sloane looked at him amusedly and said with rare humour, "It's only the sea air trying to get in."

Alone in the room Gregory shook his head. "Nervous," he told himself, "strain, that's what it is." And the flattering dream of a victory for Sloane was dispelled as quickly as it had formed. No, he told himself, this Simon was too good. Nobody could beat him. He had stopped Delaney in two rounds, Fournet in one, and they had both beaten Sloane. There was nobody at his weight that Simon hadn't beaten. That was why Sloane was fighting him. Sloane was the only middleweight of any reputation that Sloane had not fought and thrashed.

Gregory walked over to the dressing-table and picked up the photograph of Tina and stood staring at it with a faint, proprietary smile on his lips. "A sweet kid," he said to himself with approval.

It was raining too in London. The heavy buses seemed to be nosing their way with particular caution through the veil of water, and though it was not yet four o'clock the shop windows were illuminated and spilled their yellow light on to the dark, shiny surface of the pavements. People ran from shelter to shelter. Women in brightly coloured mackintoshes moved beneath umbrellas inappropriately gay or glistening and black like the skins of seals. Cars moving too close to the gutter sent out great spurts of water which washed over the pavements, and the drains in gutters could be heard gurgling insatiably.

Johnny Blake stood in a shop doorway on Charing Cross Road watching the downpour. The ceaseless descent of the rain and the unvaried sibilance of its voice exercised a mesmeric influence over his mind. He saw little of the activity of people and machines in the street, so preoccupied was he with his private world. He was living in the anarchic state of first love, living precariously as all its inhabitants must, happier and more miserable by turns than he believed he had ever been before.

The first experience of passionate love is perhaps as close as most people get to the experience of the creative artist with his alternate moments of intense excitement and despair, rapture and frustration; is by its nature mainly creative. The young lover finds some human approximation to the image of perfection that he carries in his heart, some human being who, fortuitously or by design, releases untapped sources of desire and devotion, and in solitude he moulds his conception of the human object to the shape of his ideal, at the same time modifying or changing the perfect image so that the two are identified. Much of the fear that he feels when he returns to the loved one in person may be accounted for by his half-conscious knowledge that her behaviour will not correspond to his idea of her, that further labour will be demanded of him if the synthetic image is not to be shattered. And when this almost inevitable violence occurs, what was the perfect is no longer so but carries for ever the marks of human imperfection. That is why he cannot love again in that particular way.

So Johnny Blake was standing in Charing Cross Road as the rain fell, reconciling the idea of Tina with the idea of perfect woman, his perfect woman. "She's sweet," he told himself, using almost the same words as Sid Gregory at almost the same moment. That night he was to see her again. At the thought nervousness dried his palate and pricked his flesh. It was almost the same feeling as he

had before going into the ring. *Tina*. The word seemed to taste sweet on his tongue.

But the sense of insecurity was always present; the gods he had formerly served were not entirely broken and they could still assert their diminished but accusing authority. He had not done any training for three days and he was constantly nagged by fears that his physical condition would be suffering. They all said 'it' was weakening. It sapped your stamina. Perhaps the next time he sparred at the gym everybody would be able to tell what he had been doing. The thought dismayed him; then he immediately began to reassure himself. Lots of fighters were married: Dave Sloane was married and he was as fit and strong as anyone in the ring. But perhaps you didn't do it after you'd been married for a few years, not often anyway. Then with an effort he dismissed these perturbing thoughts, deliberately refusing to contemplate the future. Tonight was all that mattered.

He went home, arriving bedraggled from the teeming rain, and began at once to prepare himself for the evening. He washed with great care, scrubbing at his hands for ten minutes to remove the signs of his work in the garage. He put cream on his hair and brushed it until it shone glossily. A clean shirt and his best pin-striped suit which he had bought with the accumulated earnings of his first three fights made him feel satisfactorily well dressed. Then he went into the living-room, ducking under the usual festoonery of drying linen that hung across it.

He said to his mother, "Just a cup of tea, Ma. I'm going out." She was ironing, a wisp of grey hair falling over her brow.

She said without looking up, "There's a pot in the kitchen. It's still hot."

He poured out a cup of tea and cut himself a slice of bread and butter. "Do you want a cup?" he called as he

chewed the bread. She did not answer. He went back to the living-room and repeated the question.

His mother said, "No, I've just had one."

He felt uneasily that there was something wrong. A moment of silence. Then she said too casually, "Going to be late, son?"

Johnny was prepared for this. He had explained his absence on Monday night by inventing a friend whom he had met at the gym and who had asked him to go to a dance and stay the night at his home in Hammersmith. His fictitious friend's name was Harry.

He said, "Going dancing with Harry. If it's very late I might stay with him again."

His mother carefully folded the freshly ironed garment and placed it on the neat pile on the table.

She said, "Doing a lot of dancing lately." Her tone was ambiguous.

Johnny tried to speak carelessly. "Good exercise. Darned good band at the Palais." But he felt his cheeks flush treacherously. He turned away and went back into the kitchen so that she should not see his discomfiture. He finished his tea quickly, put on his raincoat and left, calling goodbye from the door: he did not know whether his mother answered him or not.

It was still too early to go to Tina's, so he sat in one of the local cafés reading a newspaper for a while. At first he was still troubled by his mother's manner, but already he was becoming adept at the self-deceptions all lovers practise. And he was able to convince himself that she had not really been suspicious, only tired and crotchety.

He sat at the marble-topped table, a chipped cup of tea at his elbow and the open newspaper before him, trying not to think of the swollen hour that lay between him and his seeing Tina again.

When he arrived he was again wet through, for the downpour had increased rather than diminished. He stood in the hall looking rather sheepish, water falling from drenched hair and clothing. Tina exquisitely made up, and wearing a negligée of most seductive design and material, exclaimed, "Oh, you poor darling. Get those things off at once and have a bath."

She turned on the bath for him, gave him towels, a dressing-gown and slippers. Johnny did not quite see the necessity for having a bath because he was wet: bathing for him, apart from showers after training, had always been a weekly ritual not to be disorganised for such illogical reasons, but he followed her instructions and thoroughly enjoyed wallowing in the hot, unaccountably scented water. After he had dried himself he looked ruefully at his damp clothes, then took the dressing-gown Tina had given him. It was of red silken material and on the breast pocket Sid Gregory's initials had been elaborately embroidered. He hung it up again, hating the feel of it. For a moment he felt a strange anger directed against Tina because she had reminded him in this way of the man who possessed her. He felt vaguely that she had committed an error of taste. She should have realised that he could not wear anything of Gregory's.

So he dressed quickly in the uncomfortable damp clothes and went into the lounge, where Tina was sitting before the fire smoking.

"What on earth!" she said. "What have you put those on again for? You'll get pneumonia."

He sat down without answering and extended his hands towards the warmth of the fire.

She watched the sullen set of his lower lip, the hurt, resentful eyes, for a few moments. Then she sat on the arm of his chair and began to stroke his head. "What is it, darling?" she said soothingly. "What's wrong?" He didn't want to resist in any way. At last he said,

“You shouldn’t have done that, expecting me to wear his things.”

Quickly she suppressed a smile. “Oh, how silly of me to forget. But really, pet, you mustn’t be jealous. I’ve told you Sid is just like a father to me. He’s an old man, Johnny. You don’t think . . .” And she laughed dismissal of his absurdity. “Got that smelly old grease out of your hair?”

“What do you mean, smelly grease?” he exclaimed indignantly.

She said, “The stuff you put on your hair is vile. You should thank me for telling you. It makes such a mess on the pillow slips too.”

He blushed and twisted his head away from her caressing hand. “Now don’t sulk,” she said. “You’ve got such lovely hair and it’s a shame to spoil it with that stuff. I’ll tell you what to use. Rainer’s hair tonic and not too much of it. It’s a bit expensive but it’s good.”

He stared glumly away from her, miserable and ashamed.

She shrugged and said, “Well, I’ll get us something to eat.”

The evening had not begun well.

After the meal, during which Johnny was able to forget his earlier humiliation and become restored to a happier mood, they watched part of a play on the television set, but it quickly bored them and they both agreed before switching off that it was pretty poor entertainment.

Then Johnny said, “Perhaps we could go to a show sometime. It would be nice to go out somewhere.”

“Yes,” she agreed carelessly, “we’ll have to do that sometime.”

“What about Saturday?” he said eagerly. “The Hippodrome. They say it’s a smashing show there.”

She paused before answering. “I meant to tell you earlier, Johnny. You’d better not come after tomorrow. You never know, he might decide to come back before

Monday. It would be awful if he came back and found us together, wouldn't it?"

Once again Johnny felt the constrictions in throat and chest, the shock of disappointment, anger and jealousy that the sight and touch of Gregory's dressing-gown had excited. Again the sense of Tina's failure to behave as he felt she should. So she was just going to pack him off without any regret as soon as her lord and master returned. She was a bitch. They were all the same, women. He had often heard older men say that, and they were right. All she really cared about was the money: those moments of blind delight in the darkness, those words sobbed in what seemed an anguish of sincerity had no meaning. He stared at her and he knew that his eyes betrayed much of what he was feeling.

She went on, "There'll be plenty of times in the future, Johnny. But we've got to be careful, that's all. You as much as me. He could break you, you know. I'm thinking of you as much as me."

Johnny said painfully, "Tomorrow's the last time we'll be together, then."

"No, no, of course not. I've told you there'll be lots of times. Who knows what might happen? But we can't take any chances at first."

He could see the sense of what she was saying but it did nothing to ease his misery. He sat dumbly watching her. She switched on the radio and fiddled with the knobs until the room was alive with dance music.

"Come on, let's dance," she said. "You've got a face like a funeral."

Reluctantly he stood up and they began to dance, but it seemed that their spiritual discord was reflected in physical movement, for they no longer moved with their usual grace and ease. After a particularly maladriotic movement she said sharply, "For God's sake, Johnny, what's wrong with you tonight?"

He stopped dancing and pushed her away from him.

“Nothing that you haven’t done,” he said, self-pity struggling inside him against anger and pride.

Tina’s patience was running out. Her eyes flashed and she said in a shrill voice, divested of its usual dance hostess’s refinement, “What the hell do you mean? What makes you think you can talk to me like that? Who do you think I am?”

She looked quite magnificent: her breasts rising and falling with her excited breathing, anger warm on cheeks and bright in eyes. Johnny’s own anger was in no way abated, but the impulse to hurt became confused with sexual desire and as he stepped forward he was not quite sure what his purpose was. He took her roughly in his arms and tried to kiss her. She strained away from him, twisting her head, showing quite astonishing strength. With one arm he pinned her close to him and with his free hand seized her hair, wrenched her face round to his and pressed his mouth hard against hers. Slowly her body relaxed, her mouth opened, and she returned the kiss with passion and expertise. They remained breast to breast, mouth to mouth, for a long time while the radio played and the rain beat against the dark panes of the windows. Then she murmured breathlessly, “Come on, darling,” and with their arms about each other they left the room.

CHAPTER XI

WHEN Tina awoke she was alone. The rain had stopped but the grey light that oozed sluggishly into the bedroom told her that the day would be uncharitable and that she would be wise to remain in bed. She could not remember Johnny's leaving: perhaps he had not wanted to disturb her or perhaps she had said goodbye to him while she was half asleep and could not now remember it. She wriggled deeper into the bed, pulled up the blankets to her ears and went back to sleep as quickly and easily as a cat.

She did not awaken for the second time until the hands of the bedside clock pointed to 11.25. Then she stretched and yawned, feeling much refreshed, but as the mists of sleep receded her mind was invaded by disquieting thoughts. The pillow at her side still bore the impress of Johnny's head and though she thumped and smoothed it back to innocence she could not so easily dismiss her awareness of Johnny's existence. She was troubled by his attitude of the previous night and she felt a sudden spasm of anger and dislike for him. Why did the young fool have to ruin everything with his sloppy talk of love and for ever? Surely he'd enough sense to see that she wouldn't be likely to throw up all that Sid could give her and go and live with him in some stinking furnished room.

But her own shrewdness forced her to confess that she had been wrong in encouraging him in the first place. She should have known what would happen with an inexperienced kid like that. She must have been crazy to have started the thing. Yet he had looked so damned attractive that night, the first time he had come to the flat, and she met so few decent-looking men nowadays. There had

been something, too, about his youth and freshness which had made him almost irresistible after months of Sid. Yes, she had been starved too long, that had been the trouble. And he was lovely. Lovely without his clothes. The cream skin and the muscles and his flat hard tummy and the black curling hair. His shyness, too, made him all the more attractive.

A tremor of retrospective pleasure moved through her but when it had passed the fears of the outcome of her folly became more insistent. She would have to put an end to the affair that night when he came. She stood to lose too much.

"Damn," she said. "Oh, damn," and threw back the sheets and climbed out of bed.

In the letter-box there were three letters for Sid and the morning paper. She took the paper into the kitchen and glanced over it while she was making coffee.

The front page offered her very little of interest; the usual boring political stuff: Persia and oil, Korea and war. They probably started these scares themselves in Fleet Street. Always talking about crises and threats, and nothing ever seeming to happen. She turned the pages. Her attention was held for a moment by a photograph of a negro boxer punching a heavy bag. She made an approving noise with her tongue. 'What a man!' she said to herself. 'Negro or not I'd . . .' She smiled and left her speculations suspended while she poured herself a cup of coffee. Then she lit a cigarette and returned to the paper. A headline said "The Ebony Oracle Speaks." Tina read: "Yesterday afternoon Babe Simon, the middle-weight champion of the world, who fights Dave Sloane on Tuesday for the title, spoke to me. To anyone who does not know the Babe this might seem unremarkable, but compared with trying to get words out of the coloured assassin the extraction of blood from stones is child's play. However, I managed to put to him the time-honoured question, 'How is the fight going to go?' to

which he answered, 'I'm a fighter not a prophet.' Then he proceeded to maul an unfortunate sparring partner with scientific deadliness and impersonality. After seeing him in action I know what black magic means . . ."

Tina put the paper down and drank some coffee. It seemed as if Sloane was in for a rough time, she thought. But she had no sympathy for him. He was a dumb plug-ugly and it was doubtful whether he felt pain anyway. You had to have a brain before you felt pain. While she was dressing Tina decided to go to Archie's club for a drink and a chat with Miriam or Louise. Sid had told her that she must never go there, but he would be none the wiser and she would only stay for half an hour or so. It would be good to see them again. Let them see how she had made the grade. 'Give the poor little darlings hope,' she told herself maliciously as she applied lipstick with deft artistry. She put on her new mink and appraised herself in the full-length wardrobe mirror.

'Yes, give 'em hope,' she repeated, 'or turn 'em green with envy.' Then humming a dance tune she let herself out of the flat.

"What have you got to go to Brighton for?" Julie asked.

Dobson, face hidden behind one of the morning papers, did not answer. Julie took some of the breakfast dishes into the kitchen, then returned and asked the same question again. This time there was an abstracted murmur of interrogation from behind the paper and she repeated her words, showing no sign of impatience in voice or expression.

He lowered the paper and said, "I've got to see Sloane work out. Quite unnecessary, but I've got to go."

"Is that the coloured man?"

Her voice, anxious and falsely interested, irritated him

and he answered, "He is coloured. Greyish white, ginger haired."

Her eyes appealed hopelessly. "No, I mean black. That black man everyone is talking about."

He said with exasperation, "Really Julie, why do you pretend to be interested? You don't know anything about it and you don't want to."

She made a little gesture with her hands. "But it's your work and I want to know. There must be something in it that I don't understand. Something that fascinates you."

"There is," he said, "and you never would understand. No woman understands it."

"But women do go to boxing matches."

"Oh yes, women go to boxing matches but not to watch boxing."

"What do they go for then?"

"Revenge," he said, throwing the paper aside and standing up. "What's the time?"

"Nearly half-past ten."

He went to the telephone which stood on the bureau and dialled a number. Julie watched him as he spoke: "That you, Alf? Dobson here, Phil Dobson. Have you got the top liner fixed for your next show?" . . . "Oh, I see." . . . "No, you can't 'phone back, I've got to go over to Brighton this morning. Leaving right away." . . . "Well, perhaps for ten minutes." . . . "Okay, I'll see you just after eleven. The Gloucester Arms. Yes, I know where it is, 'bye."

He turned to meet Julie's reproachful gaze. "Phil," she said.

"Yes?"

She went on hesitantly. "Who was that you were speaking to?"

He said, "Floyd. He's a matchmaker—not weddings, fights. I've got to see him to get some information for the paper."

"You're going to a public house." It was said so timorously that it could hardly have been called an accusation.

"Yes," he said softly, controlling his voice with an obvious effort, "I'm going to a public house." He watched her face caricaturing sadness. The long, bony face whose silent lies of sensitivity and intelligence had once deceived him utterly. She wailed, "Oh, why do you do it?"

He winced. "Look, Julie," he said, "I've got to see this man. I'm going to meet him in the only possible place. I shall have a half-pint of beer, then go and catch my train to Brighton. Now for heaven's sake stop acting like a baby."

"Oh, how many times have I heard that. One half-pint. Once you get into one of those places you never leave until you are drunk."

"That's not true—regrettably."

"Don't you realise what it is like for me to see all that is best in you being destroyed? God, I was ashamed of you! I didn't mention it before because I didn't want to humiliate you. But it was horrible. Drunk, sick, half unconscious like a horrible great idiot. And Mr. Feltham there pitying me. Yes, pitying me."

Dobson said, "From what you say of my condition I was the one who deserved pity."

"Oh, you're shameless. Quite shameless. Inhuman," and she began to weep.

Dobson looked at her without compassion as she flung herself sideways, resting her forehead on the arm of the chair. He felt the pulse beat in his temples and a slight nausea troubled his inside. Cruelty excited him like lust, words that would hurt like whips tempted him to give them utterance but guilt was present too, forcing them to remain unspoken. He put on his hat and coat and said to the prostrate figure of his wife, "Well, goodbye. I'll see you tonight."

She lifted her head; her face was ugly and patterned with grief and he was surprised by a sudden twist of pity.

"You're going," she said. "You would just leave me like this."

Pity was immediately dispelled by the histrionic tone. He said harshly, "You have no real sense of the dramatic. If you had you wouldn't let me stay here to reduce your scene to bathos."

She sat up straight and said, "You are contemptible."

"Very likely. I am also late."

He went towards the door.

"Phil," she called.

He turned with an exaggerated look of patience. "Yes, my dear?"

"Don't leave me like this, please. Can't you say something to give me some little hope?"

"Yes, I could say something," he said. "But my essential gentlemanliness prevents me."

He slammed the door behind him and ran down the stairs to the street as if he were being pursued. But he had not really left Julie and the broken parts of their marriage behind: part of it was inside him: remorse, the sense of failure, self-pity and disgust. How would it all end, he wondered. What would be the result of all the bickering, hating, loving and pitying?

Exhaustion perhaps: the negative acceptance of a condition closer to death than life, the funeral of hope, the cold bed of despair. And what was the point of it all? Fighting in the darkness like the game they used to play as kids, blindfold boxing. Not knowing where your opponent was. Hitting out at thin air, then being struck hard in the face when you least expected it. No decision. Nobody won, nobody lost, but it usually ended up with both protagonists in tears.

He boarded a bus to Paddington. Praed Street moved past the window. The small grimy shops which offered without hope their stocks of secondhand and obsolete

articles; the snack bars and furtive little chemists' shops passed by as if on a conveyor belt.

A newsvendor cried out his wares—"Star, News, Standard." It seemed like a cry of pain.

Dobson felt the shadow of depression deepening. What kind of chance did anyone stand in this world? How could people live together in harmony when they were surrounded on every side by ugliness, artificiality and evil: the fake urgency of the newspaper headlines deceiving them with threats and promises, the cinema and the pub inviting them to hang up disquiet with their hats and coats and live vicariously for an hour or two before returning to the misery of reality: the debasement of culture, the reign of the spiv and whore.

The bus stopped at Paddington Station and he alighted, still oppressed by the weight of melancholy and dissatisfaction. Alf Floyd was waiting for him in the saloon bar of the Gloucester Arms. Floyd was a small man with a curiously chubby face on a wizened jockey's body. His face looked as if it had once been quite long but had been put in a vice and squashed so that the chin had been pressed upwards and brow downwards towards his pug nose. He wore a rather dirty camel-hair overcoat with enormous shoulders that drooped where his natural shoulders ended.

"What you having?" he said in answer to Dobson's greeting.

"A half of beer," Dobson said, perhaps remembering his promise to Julie.

"Bitter on a morning like this," Floyd said. "Have a Scotch. Warm you up."

Dobson did not demur and he swallowed the drink quickly and ordered more. "Have you got the dope?" he said.

Floyd produced a piece of paper. "All on there. Simpson and Tasker topping the bill. You'll see what the prelims are. Nothing to interest you much."

"Thanks," Dobson said, pocketing the paper. "Well, I'd better be on my way."

"What's the hurry? Time for another. Two Scotches, barman."

Dobson felt a familiar and not unpleasant paralysis fingering the will to action as the refilled glass was handed to him. "Cheers," he said, raising the drink.

Floyd said, "Writing on the wall, ain't it? This Sloane-Simon scrap."

Dobson said, "Looks like it. Still, you never know."

"What do you mean? Sloane don't stand a dog's chance."

Dobson shrugged and finished his drink. 'One more,' he thought, 'and then I'll go.' It was like a nervous habit performed without enjoyment. He bought more drinks. He was beginning to feel more cheerful. "Accidents can happen," he said. "Cut eye, careless punch in the matrimonial prospects and it's all over."

"I wouldn't give him a hundred-to-one chance."

"Have you ever seen Simon fight?" Dobson asked.

"Well, no. But look at his record. Nothing could touch him. They say he's the greatest middleweight ever. Better than Mickey Walker."

Dobson said sagely, "They all get beaten some time." He did not notice Floyd ordering more drinks but he found a fresh glass in his hand.

Floyd said, "Have you seen Simon fight?"

"I've seen him work out."

"What's he like? Good as they say?"

Without conscious summoning the image of Simon appeared before Dobson, Simon in the ring moving with deceptive leisure, graceful, indolent, the long left flicking out like a trainer's whip, and without any show of effort the deadly lightning right smashing on to its target.

"He's terrific," Dobson said.

Floyd grinned, "There won't be no cut eyes. Sloane

won't get near enough to him. He'll be lucky to last three rounds."

The whisky was beginning to take effect. Dobson drank and felt the small liquid bomb descend, explode gently, pleasantly in his stomach: incendiary. He said, "How would you feel if you were going in with this nigger on Tuesday? How would you feel?"

"I'd take out a bloody great life insurance policy."

"No, I mean how would you feel? You used to fight, didn't you? How did you used to feel the day of the fight, when you were waiting in the dressing-room?"

"Same as most people, I suppose. Sinking feeling in the guts: kept having to run outside every two minutes."

"I used to fight," Dobson said.

"Yeah. I remember."

Dobson was surprised and he felt a glow of pleasure tempered with incredulity. "You remember *me*?"

"That's right. You used to fight for St. Pancras. I was a junior then. Saw you win your divisional championship."

Dobson smiled, proud and sentimental: "I wasn't bad, was I?"

Floyd said with perfect seriousness, "You was good. You'd have done all right as a pro."

Dobson offered him a cigarette which he refused rather contemptuously, producing from his pocket a tin of darkly evil tobacco and a little packet of rice papers. Very deftly he rolled a cigarette and lit it.

Dobson ordered more drinks. "It's a great game," he said. "The only game."

Floyd manœuvred the cigarette cleverly from one corner of his mouth to the other but did not answer.

It's the only game with anything of the heroic in it." Dobson said. "Football: that's ugly, no dignity, no heroism. Twenty-two louts rolling about in the mud,

shirts like butchers' aprons. There's ritual in boxing, beauty."

He became aware of Floyd's eyes, puzzled and slightly amused, watching him obliquely. Floyd did not understand. He was a professional: a worker in the industry.

Dobson said, simplifying his meaning out of existence, "It's individual, a battle. There's just two of you . . ."

"That's right," Floyd said, finishing his drink. "Well, got to be going, Phil. Be seeing you."

Dobson watched him leave the bar, shabbily smart in the belted overcoat and pointed shoes.

All alone now: solitude put on like a garment in crowded places: the role of exile and alienation. Words in great disorderly battalions pressed towards the frontiers of recognition, sent scouts forward, then small patrols. Words. *Alchimie de la douleur. Lachrymae, lachrymae. Where are the eagles and the trumpets? Tristesse. Tendresse. O my love is slain, I saw him go o'er the white alps alone.* Words, which hid the truth, yet you couldn't get at the truth without using them. Paradox. One day he would: one day he would take up the challenge. He was a fighter: you had to be a fighter to be a poet. Beauty everywhere about you. Baudelaire and his black whore. Putain: funny, it looked like puritan. They probably were too. One day he would do it. Even this ugly day, grey and jagged, could be changed by language into a beautiful thing. Was that metamorphosis an act of deceit, a lie? Or was it affirmation of a truth, too immediate to be seen until you got it into perspective? The bleak winter sky, the clouds like obituaries—silent obituaries, of cloud.

He belched silently, tasting bile. Business men were coming into the bar for their sandwiches and glasses of Bass. He had to get to Brighton: he would be too late for the work-out but he had better go in case McLaughlin found out. He emptied his glass and went out into the

street, noticing that his walk was not perfectly steady. On the opposite side of the road a taxi drew up and a woman stepped out, a leg extended delicately, toe pointed as if she were entering a bath. She was tall and slender with black hair falling on to expensively furred shoulders. He watched her pay the driver and walk away, graceful and provocative on high heels; nylons and mink: money in furs. She disappeared down the steps of a basement.

"Well, I'm damned," said Dobson, and began to cross the road.

CHAPTER XII

AS Tina had guessed, both Miriam and Louise were in Archie's. Louise, whose pale, bloated face was rather like that of a woman Tina had once seen fished out of the Thames, had altered the colour of her hair from black to a startling red: otherwise she had not changed much. Miriam had not changed at all. She still looked like an expensive doll: flaxen hair, carefully painted face, round china blue eyes with absolutely no expression in them. They both sat on red leather-seated stools at the bar, Louise sagging in the middle and Miriam erect as ever, back perfectly stiff and head motionless as if she were on display in a toy-shop window. They each had a half-empty glass of light ale before them which looked as if it had been standing there a long time. Tina noted this with quiet pleasure: things were not going too well with the poor things.

"Hullo there," she said.

Louise squealed with excited and patently false delight: "Darling! Where have you been all my life?"

Miriam's mouth smiled and she said, "Hullo, Tina."

Archie looked up from a sporting paper and roared, "Stap me! If it isn't my favourite brunette. How are you, darling?"

He had not changed either. He still wore a vast moustache like a regimental tie and he looked and spoke like a character out of a P. G. Wodehouse novel. He was fond of referring to 'we R.A.F. types' and he employed so much service jargon that it often became difficult for the uninitiated to follow his discourse. He had in fact been in the Royal Air Force, but not in the capacity of air

gunner as he always implied. He had been a corporal cook and had been discharged after eighteen months' service owing to an anxiety neurosis resulting from the explosion of one of the cookhouse boilers.

The club premises, which consisted of one not very large room, reflected certain of his tastes and characteristics. The lighting filtered through red shades, creating a rather infernal chiaroscuro. The upright piano played almost incessantly tunes which were slightly out of date. One or two lanterns hung from the false beam in the ceiling and there was a tiny dancing floor which was no more than twelve feet square. On the walls hung a few old calendars showing pictures of vamps and flappers with bobbed hair, and bare shoulders.

"What are you drinking, girls?" Tina asked.

After a brief show of reluctance they agreed to have gin. "You have one too, Archie," she said.

"One two. That means a double." His laugh was like the honking of an old-fashioned motor horn, a little sad, nostalgic and absurd. "Well, bottoms up," he said, lifting the manly pint tankard of bitter. "Happy landings."

"Not working, dear?" Tina said to Louise.

Louise was on the stage and Miriam was a model. Archie approved of these convenient fictions because acknowledgment of the girls' true profession would lower the tone of his club: and he would listen sympathetically and without irony to their stories of past successes and present disappointments.

"No, dear," Louise said, "nothing doing at all in the West End. Looks as though I'll have to go back into rep. Of course, that damned agent of mine is a washout."

"And what are you doing, Tina?" Miriam asked. "How is it you're not around any more?"

Tina said, "I'm married." She watched the two pairs of eyes flicker down to her left hand. It was gloved.

"Well, well," Louise said, "that was smooth work. How long ago did this happen?"

“About a year.”

The thin voice of Toby the pianist interrupted. “Not one little word for the maestro? Oh fickle, fickle woman.” He did not stop playing.

“Hullo, darling,” Tina said. “I didn’t notice you there. Thought Archie had got a juke-box installed.” Toby put out his tongue. “Give it a drink,” she said to Archie.

“What’s your man like?” Louise asked. “Rich?” Her eyes were on the mink.

“Comfortable,” Tina said complacently. “Comfortable, quite comfortable.”

“Old?” Miriam asked.

Tina smiled. “No, not old. Very young, in fact.”

Louise registered incredulity. “Young *and* money. What’s wrong with him. Has he got a wooden leg or do you have to whip him every night?”

Tina described her husband to them. She told them that he was dark, fairly tall, wide shoulders and slim waist, and that he had beautiful eyes. They went through a pantomime of envy, obviously not believing her. She did not at first realise that she had been describing Johnny Blake to them, thinking that she had only portrayed some vague ideal. The realisation intrigued her. What a combination, she thought. Johnny’s body and Sid’s money. What more could a woman wish for? And if only Johnny would act sensibly she could have it that way too.

One or two men had come into the club and she did not have to look at them to know that they were not interesting. The eyes of Miriam automatically turned to the door as the men entered, assessed and rejected them in a second.

Toby began to sing in a curiously pleasing voice, throaty, careless and erotic:

“The flowers lift up their heads
As you pass them by.
They want to be close to you
And so do I.”

The last line was accompanied by a coy flickering of eyelashes and conscious smirk. Tina began to feel very grateful that she had escaped from Archie's and she felt a moment of genuine pity for the women which prompted her to buy another round of drinks.

Archie said as he served her, "You're looking wizard, old thing. Absolutely bang on," His eyes, anxious and obsequious, offered her praise that was entirely without covetousness.

Tina reflected that despite his bulk and general robust appearance, the symbolical whiskers and manly pints of bitter, he seemed quite sexless: more like a skilfully made-up dummy than a living man.

She glanced round the room. An elderly man sat in the corner holding the hand of a faded woman who looked as if she might have been a country parson's wife: they were quite absorbed in each other. Next to her at the bar two men who carried with them an unmistakable air of the racecourse were talking earnestly, heads close together, and beyond them stood a medium-sized, nondescript man in a rather shabby raincoat and felt hat which he had not bothered to remove. He was staring at her intently and looked a little drunk. She thought there was something faintly familiar about him and guessed that they might have exchanged a word or two in the old days: certainly he had never been one of her 'friends.' Momentarily she was moved by a slight patronising pity for him as he stared at her, his eyes confessing the nature of his longing. Then she turned to Miriam and Louise and said, "Well, we'll have one more and then I must be off."

Louise said, "What does your hubby do for a living?"

"He's in the City. It's a mystery to me, but he brings home the bread and butter."

"Yes." The eyes, calculating, hungry, were drawn magnetically to her coat and to the single strand of pearls at her throat.

'Poor dears,' Tina thought, but she was grateful for the

emphasising of her own security and comfort. She lifted her glass. "Must be on my way," she said, and swallowed the gin.

A voice at her side broke in, "Excuse me."

She turned and saw the man in the raincoat looking at her with an expression that used to mean in the old days that she had found a new 'friend.'

He touched the brim of his hat. "I believe we've met before?"

She said, "Yes, of course. I thought I knew your face. It was quite a long time ago, wasn't it?"

"Yes," he agreed. "Quite a time."

He had a rather pleasant voice, she thought. Educated. Probably fallen on hard times.

He said, "Would you have a drink with me?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'd love to, but I've got a date. Some other time maybe."

She felt suddenly quite urgently that she must get out of the club, and the ingratiating expression on the man's face angered her unreasonably. What made the shabby little nonentity think he could pick her up? Louise was more in his line.

He said, "Just one before you go."

"I've told you I've got a date," she snapped. "Stop bothering me." She saw his face flush. Then he said, and the words struck her like a blow under the heart, "Really, Mrs. Gregory, I don't see the necessity for such rudeness."

She tried not to show that he had surprised her and said with attempted nonchalance, "Where have we met? I don't properly remember . . . you know my husband?"

"Very well indeed," he said. "In fact I shall be seeing him in a couple of hours."

"I'm sorry I was so rude," Tina said quickly. "You know how it is. Strangers always . . . I'll have that drink if it's still going."

"Of course. Gin, isn't it?"

He bought a gin and a whisky and suggested that they should sit down.

She agreed and followed him to one of the little tables, nodding to Louise and Miriam. Ripples of alarm spread through her, impeding her attempt to think calmly. 'What stinking luck!' she thought. 'What stinking bloody luck.'

"Your health," he said, raising his glass, watching her with slightly hostile insolence.

Yes, it was she all right, and in her proper element too. A whore amongst whores. But very regal: the queen of whores. She must cost Gregory quite a bit in running expenses. That coat must be worth a small fortune. A lot of blood had been spilt, a lot of punches taken on the chin to put that on her back. but not on Gregory's chin. On the deceived chins of 'his boys.' There was something propitious about blood being shed in order to beautify her. She would probably savour the idea if it were suggested to her. But God, she was lovely. She looked a tart—but what a tart! There was nothing artificial about those calves, about the strain of calf more than naked under nylon. Underwear. Black most likely. Lace. See the legs flow from thigh down into those shoes high-heeled; the soft swelling of buttocks, tender smooth under the skimpy black lace. Touch, dimple the flesh with finger dig, grasp full hands, warm handfuls of the sweet flesh. See her hands, the finger-nails, glossy blood red, tigress. Tame her with whip-lash, tender, sweet, white flesh cry out red weals: tame with club, blunt instrument. Hold it in the white hands bleeding at finger-tips. See mouth, lips not like other women's, Julie's mouth anæmic, pale, pursed, proud. Mean. Her mouth ripe, luscious, more than ordinary mouth. Shaped by nature for her function or changed, maybe adapting itself, changing until it was like another, second. Gregory, how

did Gregory, how often? He was not young: health bad too. The great belly, surgical belt, long woollen pants, false teeth in the glass at night. How did she? But that was it. A whore. No feeling, only function. But what a whore. Gregory. Gregory was in Brighton, away. Had he locked her up: an iron belt? Gregory away. Was it possible? See those other two watching her, appraising everything she was wearing. She'd made good. Same profession but she was at the top of the ladder like an established film star talking to a couple of third-rate chorus girls. Yes, Gregory was away. No, it wasn't possible. Yet perhaps she might. You never knew. She might, just for the difference, just because she must hate him. Revenge. She must hate him for his power, his money. Or perhaps for his big belly and long woollen pants. It might be possible.

She hadn't recognised him. Why should she? One meeting nine months ago for a couple of minutes at the Thompson fight. Only time he'd seen her. She hadn't been there the time he went to Gregory's flat. Gregory didn't take her round much. Kept her at home in a glass case. Black lace and mouth warm and the flesh smooth as silk and soft as butter. If she were not talking to those two he would ask her to have a drink. What about his hat? Keep it on. Better keep it on. It didn't matter in a dive like this and she wouldn't notice. Better keep it on. Damn and blast it.

What was that song? heard it before somewhere. 'The flowers lift up their heads.' An old one. Queer, that pianist. Definitely queer. Who would he meet here? You wouldn't think it would be much of a place for him. But then you never knew. Might have his own reasons.

She had looked at him, looked at him but not seen him. No bank roll, no Rolls, no six feet three of muscular masculine beauty. No hair. What the hell for her to look at? She hadn't recognised him either. What was the good? She might have a drink on him but what else? What was

the good? He did not want her conversation: that mouth wasn't made for talking. They want to be close to you, and so do I. The 'thirties. That was the song. The whole place reminded you of the 'thirties. Those pictures, the tunes, the bright young barman. No, he was a different product: the R.A.F. tie and moustache like badges of rank; the 'forties. The wizard prangs, the cute popies, brown jobs and good types. A very familiar type: *when approached the accused, A.C. Blinks, was wearing the uniform of a Wing-Commander with the ribbons of the D.F.C. and D.S.O.*

The two conspirators next to him were bookies obviously. You could smell them. The sport of kings. There was something about the smooth-muscled glossiness of chestnut haunches that reminded you. Hell, he would have to get out, get to Brighton. He was going to be late, anyway, but he'd got to go. To hell with her, he didn't want to talk to her. No, not talk. The sport of kings would be all right but not . . .

He walked away from the bar. Not speak; ignore her. No point in it.

"Excuse me," he said, "I believe we've met before?"

He waited for her reaction. She smiled mechanically, professionally bright. "Yes, of course. I thought I knew your face. It was quite a long time ago, wasn't it?"

She had no recollection of him.

"Yes, quite a time," he said. "Would you have a drink with me?"

Her refusal did not surprise him: why should she want his drink? Gregory kept her well supplied. He could smell her perfume now. He said, and was angered by the tone of pleading in his voice, "Just one before you go."

He saw her face harden, the full lips draw inward, the eyes narrow, freezing to bright menace.

Her voice, the voice of the streets, snapped, "I've told you I have a date. Stop bothering me."

He felt the words connect, sink into him, expand in his

chest painfully. His face was hot with mortification and anger. 'The bitch,' he thought, 'the cheap little bitch.'

He said, controlling his voice, "Really, Mrs. Gregory, I don't see the necessity for such rudeness."

The effect was remarkable: better than he had hoped. She was not merely puzzled that he should know her name; she was frightened. What could she be so frightened of? She wasn't with another man: why should she be so worried by his recognising her? Perhaps if he could find out he might be able to—no, the idea was fantastic. Grand Guignol. Yet she was a whore. If he could.

They sat down at the table.

She said, "What have you to see my husband about?"

"Business," he said, watching her legs as she crossed them.

"Are you in the same line?"

He said smiling, "You don't remember me, do you?"

She looked uncomfortable. He would make her pay somehow, talking to him as though he were a bloody lackey.

"Well . . ." she began. Then laughing affectedly, "You know one meets so many people."

"Naturally," he said, "in your profession." He saw anger stiffen her face again. She said, "What do you mean, my profession?"

He answered innocently, "Aren't you on the stage? I had an idea you were."

"Oh no, I'm not. . . . I used to be though."

"Don't you sometimes feel you would like to be back in harness? Don't you ever regret giving it all up for the humdrum life of a housewife?" He stopped himself from grinning with difficulty. No one could have looked less like a housewife than she did. And he discovered with surprise that he no longer desired her. The antipathy she had engendered in him was too strong: it had neutralised lust. He did not want her: but he was not indifferent. He wanted to injure her.

She dismissed his question and said, "What time will you be seeing Sid?"

Dobson looked at his watch. "Very soon," he told her. "In fact I must be going now. Have you any message for him?"

"No, not really. I just . . ."

He raised his eyebrows patiently, sympathetically. "Yes?"

She adjusted her most appealing smile and said, "Would you mind not mentioning you saw me? You see I told him I was going to stay with my mother in the country because he doesn't like me being on my own in Town. Fact is I got back this morning—so boring down there. He'd be worried, poor dear, if he knew I was on my own. So would you mind just not mentioning you saw me?" Her smile became radiant.

Dobson grinned sourly. "It would not have occurred to me to mention it," he said, pushing back his chair and standing up. "Goodbye, Mrs. Gregory, I hope we may meet again sometime."

"Yes," she said, exuding enthusiasm, "so do I—what is your name? I know your face so well."

"Fawcett. Anthony Fawcett."

They shook hands and Dobson was again surprised to find that she no longer excited his senses. His dislike for her was if anything increased. He touched the brim of his hat and hurried out to catch the train for Brighton.

It was late afternoon when Dobson arrived at the Star and Anchor, and Sloane had finished his work-out. Sloane trained in the well-equipped gymnasium which had been built in the grounds of the small hotel established for the use of fighters. In the morning he would do his serious work and in the afternoon he would skip and punch the light ball for the delectation of those members of the public who cared to pay a shilling for

admission. Dobson should have been present for the morning session: as it was he had missed both.

He had slept a little in the train and had awakened feeling rather ill. Lack of food and the whisky he had drunk had given him a headache and his mouth was dry and evil-tasting.

The landlord of the Star and Anchor asked him to wait in the lounge while he called Gregory. Dobson looked round with distaste. There were too many mirrors and the furniture, which was neither decorative nor particularly comfortable, looked self-consciously new. There was a slightly unpleasant smell of paint in his nostrils.

Gregory came into the lounge looking more than ever like a caricature of a successful boxer's manager. He wore a pale blue suit and shoes of a singularly hideous yellow. A cigar stuck out from his pink jowl at an assertive angle.

"Expected you earlier, Phil," he said, reproach tempering his affability. "You're too late to see Dave work to-day."

Dobson apologised grudgingly. "I got held up," he said.

"You don't look in good shape," Gregory said. "How about some tea? I'll see what Dave's doing." He went out and reappeared after about five minutes with Sloane, who was wearing a thick sweater under an old tweed jacket.

"Hullo, Phil," Sloane said, "what happened to you?"

"Got held up. How are you feeling?"

"O.K. Never better."

A young waitress served tea. Dobson watched Gregory's eyes appraising her as she leaned over their table arranging the china; saw him exhale expensive smoke and make some elephantine sally. The girl blushed and was obviously pleased and flattered at his attention. Dobson felt himself go taut with hatred. With fascinated

revulsion he watched Gregory's small, podgy hands, the great sensual face and small, calculating eyes. Then he thought of Tina and a small ghost of desire was resurrected, but it did not lessen his resentment for her treatment of him in the club. He would like to harm them both, he thought, and he believed that it was in his power to do so. Why had she not wanted Gregory to know she was in Town? Perhaps he believed her to be somewhere out of temptation's way and she was deceiving him, perhaps having an affair in his absence. Certainly that stuff about a mother in the country was eye-wash. He decided to investigate.

Gregory said, "Listen, why don't you stay the night? You could get a room here and you could see Dave work tomorrow. It's his last day for training. Believe me, you'll get a surprise. He's a new boy." He beamed upon Sloane, avuncular and insincere.

"No, I've got to get back."

Sloane said, "Go on, Phil. You stay. Perhaps you'll believe I've got a chance then. You'd be the only reporter in the world to think that."

Dobson thought for a moment. He didn't feel like making the journey back to London and he might be able to get some sort of story if he stayed. He decided to 'phone McLaughlin and try to get his permission. He said, "I'll 'phone the paper. They'll want to know what I'm staying for tomorrow, as they think I've already seen your work-out this morning."

"Oh," Gregory said, "you weren't held up officially then?"

"Partly," Dobson said brusquely.

Sloane suggested, "Tell them I'm working on a secret move; it's true too. That's all right, ain't it, Sid, letting Phil know?"

"Sure," Gregory said. "Sure it's all right."

Dobson reflected. "Very well then, I'll see what my chief says."

He rang up the office and found that McLaughlin was in. "I've got the chance of an unusual story," he said. "Sloane and Gregory are planning out some secret move that they think will beat Simon. Nobody else from the Press has seen it but they've offered to let me see it in action tomorrow morning. Do you think it's worth staying overnight? . . . Oh yes, there's one thing: Tasker and Simpson are topping the bill at the Earls Court show. . . . No, nothing in the prelim. . . . Yes, I'll do that."

He replaced the receiver. It had been easier than he had expected, he thought, and he might be able to wangle a bit on expenses. Then he 'phoned Julie. Her voice sounded very faint after McLaughlin's staccato, tough-guy locution.

"Phil here," he said. "I've got to stay overnight in Brighton. Something unexpected's cropped up. I'll be in early tomorrow." He waited for complaints or implied accusations but she only said, "Oh, what a nuisance. Never mind, I don't suppose it can be helped." As was often the case, separation from her ignited a small spark of affection. He said, "I'm sorry about this morning, dear. It was—I wasn't feeling too good."

She accepted this quite graciously and they said good-bye. He went to the lounge and finished his tea, which was almost cold.

"All fixed," he said. "I'm looking forward to seeing the secret manoeuvre."

Sloane grinned, "It'll work all right. I've got a feeling."

Dobson liked Sloane. He thought that those people who imagined prize-fighters as brutal and inhuman creatures should meet the British middleweight champion. It would be difficult to find a more gentle, kindly person and a more devoted husband and father. Fighters were not generally bullies: not the best fighters at any rate, because bullying was a symptom of cowardice and a deep-rooted sense of inferiority. But how could he reconcile

his belief in boxing as the one truly heroic game with such a practitioner to whom each fight was merely another job? He looked at the good-humoured, rugged face of the boxer and smiled involuntarily. Hardly a symbol of heroism, he thought, yet in the ring under the brilliant arc lamp facing the black fighter who moved smoothly and viciously as a panther he would seem to be heroic. Yes, that was it. He was the vehicle of heroism, the unconscious agent through which the heroic manifested itself. Without knowing it he would fill ten thousand hearts with hope and renewed respect for human courage: he would effect a kind of catharsis. That is if he were not sent sprawling ignominiously in the very first round. After all, there was nothing beautiful about the ageing Jewish pianist until he began to play: nothing beautiful about the scrofulous and drunken poet until you heard the words he forced together into such splendid companies: each was probably concerned more with fees, royalties, women and drink than with demonstrating that which was within man yet at the same time greater than man.

Dobson became aware that Gregory was speaking to him. "I'm sorry," he said. "I was thinking. What did you say?"

Gregory said, "The missus'll think you're on a bender tonight, eh? Night out in Brighton," he winked. Dobson felt a chill wave of dislike pass through him and he didn't answer.

Gregory went on, "You might as well have the fun if you're going to be blamed anyway." His cheeks trembled as he chuckled.

Dobson said, watching him carefully, "By the way, I saw your wife as I was leaving London today." The pause before he said 'wife' was only just perceptible.

"Oh, did you? Didn't know you knew her."

Dobson was puzzled. Gregory seemed quite unconcerned. Why had she been so insistent that he should not

mention his seeing her to Gregory? "Yes," he said, "you introduced me at the Thompson fight."

"Oh yes. Cute dish, isn't she?" Gregory smiled proudly.

"Yes," Dobson said. "Very attractive indeed."

Sloane said, "You seen Simon work out, Phil?"

Dobson nodded.

"What did you think of him?"

"He's pretty good."

Sloane said, mock ruefully, "Bet you're another who thinks I ought to be measured for my coffin."

"I wouldn't say that. I'll wait till I see you try out your plan in the gym. What are you going to do, surround him?"

Gregory laughed indulgently. "Don't take the mike," he said. "Dave's going to pull the surprise of the century."

Sloane said, "I've got something to do. See you later."

Dobson watched him walk out of the room, automatically contrasting his heavy-shouldered, rather clumsy slouch with the movements of the negro Simon.

"He's gone to write to his old Dutch," Gregory said. "Every day he writes. Good steady boy, Dave."

"I like him," Dobson said.

"Yeah." There was a pause, then Gregory said, "Where did you see the wife to-day?" He spoke quite casually, obviously making conversation.

Dobson said, "In a dive in Paddington. Place called 'Archie's.' I haven't been there for years."

He was astonished, almost frightened by the expression on Gregory's face. So that was the reason for her nervousness, he thought. "What's the matter?" he said. "Are you feeling rotten?"

Gregory's features, which had seemed to disintegrate as if he were going to cry, making him look at once baby-like yet very old in an oddly grotesque way, were reassembled with a visible effort.

"I'm all right," he said. "Bit of a pain. Indigestion. Think I'll lie down for a bit. You'll be all right, won't you? See the guv'nor about your room. Tell him who you are." As he left he attempted a grin; it was not very successful.

"Hope you feel better soon," Dobson said, betrayed by an unexpected feeling of sympathy. But Gregory made no answer.

CHAPTER XIII

HE sat on the bed and looked at the photograph of her smiling at him from the dressing-table. It was a good photograph. Three cabinet size had cost him eight guineas. It was a good photograph, but it wasn't Tina. It was the mask that hid Tina from him: a pretty mask, but it was the girl he wanted, not the mask.

She had gone to Archie's. He'd told her that she must not go there again and she had gone, thinking he was safely out of the way. There could be only one reason for her going there. Not to drink; she could have drinks at home; there was always plenty. If she wanted company she could go to the Mitre. There could be only one reason. She had gone back to the old hunting ground. He was too old. She wanted somebody younger. He could buy her clothes, give her everything that money could buy, but that wasn't enough. He was too old.

And this was what he had been struggling for, fighting for, all through the years: this was success. A nice flat, a nice car, plenty of clothes, good cigars—and nobody caring a damn for you.

He remembered the days at Brown's the fishmonger's. The smell of fish had clung to his clothes all the time; seemed to get right inside him somehow, so that when he stepped straight out of his bath on Friday nights it was still there. At night school the other kids had not wanted to sit next to him because of it. Like a disease it had been: worse, because people were sorry for you if you had a disease.

Boxing had always attracted him. At first he had wanted to be a fighter, but a few rounds of sparring in

the local club had soon punctured that ambition. Yet he had felt the fascination of the game and he had been smart enough to realise that others felt it too, that you could always get people to pay to see men fight.

His first promotion had been above Cope's garage: seating capacity two hundred and thirty, tickets sixpence to two-and-six—and he had made a profit. But promoting had not really been in his line: there was too much risk attached to it. One flop and you could be cleaned out. So he had become a manager. You took twenty-five per cent. and the mugs took the punches on the chin. When they were played out you got somebody else to take their place. Fighters may come and fighters may go, but the manager goes on for ever. Like Old Father Thames or whatever it was. He had made good; he had got what he wanted.

It was a pity in a way that Lil wasn't still alive to enjoy it. She'd had a tough break all right. Just when things were beginning to go well, when the cash was beginning to roll in, she'd pegged out. She'd been a bit of a tartar at times but without her he wouldn't have got where he was to-day. Maybe things would have been better for them if they'd had a kid. But they hadn't had one and they'd never really found out whose fault it was. She had never left him in any doubt as to where she considered the blame to lie. But she hadn't been a bad old sort and they'd had some good times together. It was funny, but he used to enjoy those cheap trips to Southend every bit as much as he now enjoyed a fortnight on the Continent. Lil wasn't a bad looker when she was a girl, before she became all skin and bones and bad temper. That was the illness of course, the illness and disappointment about not having kids.

When she went he had not really felt anything much: he hadn't felt like crying at all. But for a long time after he used to have a queer feeling every so often of having mislaid something he couldn't give a name to. He didn't

believe all that talk about love and wedding bells that they gave you on the pictures. It had always seemed to him that the two things didn't have anything to do with each other. Marriage was about the quickest way to finish love off unless you had enough money to get away from each other regularly. He did not think that he had ever loved his wife. He could not remember even before they were married ever having told her that he loved her. He had never felt about her as he felt about—he groaned inwardly, his mind holding back her name—Tina. “Oh hell!” he said. “Oh hell!”

Why should he give a damn for that cheap little tart? He could throw her out and get another in any time he liked. Why had she gone there? You couldn't rely on anybody to stick by you for your own sake. But he had bought her: he had priced her and paid for her, so she was only accepting the bargain on his own terms. No, he was getting confused. That wasn't right. Had she met somebody there? Some of those young fellows with yellow waistcoats and suède shoes who talked like B.B.C. announcers. That's probably what she was after. She would probably. No. No, not that. She couldn't do that. In his own. No. Bed.

He stood up. Perspiration pricked his armpits and he was breathing quickly.

“Christ!” he groaned. “I'm crazy about her.”

Downstairs Dobson was drinking a glass of bitter in the bar.

The landlord, leaning forward on hairy arms, said, “I wanted to be a writer once myself. My teacher at school always said I should have been. Very good at composition I was. It's funny the things you want to do and the things you end up doing. Isn't it? I bet you never thought you'd be doing what you're doing now when you were a kid.”

“No,” Dobson said, “I don't think I did.”

"What did you want to be?"

"A publican," Dobson answered without hesitation.

"Really? No kidding?"

"No kidding."

"Well, that's a coincidence, isn't it?"

"Sometimes I think I might write a book even now. You see a lot of interesting people in my work. Very interesting characters. They say every man's got one good book in him."

"That's right. And every woman too, I shouldn't wonder."

"Now, now," the landlord said roguishly.

Dobson pushed his glass over to be replenished.

"Got any children?" the landlord asked.

Dobson shook his head.

"I've got two. A boy and a girl. Do you know what the boy wants to be? A ballet dancer."

"Rather unusual. How old is he?"

"Nine. And do you know what the girl wants to be?" He fixed Dobson with a challenging stare.

"No," Dobson said.

"She wants to be a boxer."

Dobson laughed. "A bit of a problem."

The landlord was quite serious. "The wife took them to see the ballet about a month ago. 'Don't take Freddie,' I says to her. 'He won't be interested in that stuff.' But she took them both. Rita, she's eleven, was bored stiff but Freddie lapped it up. Rita sees the fighters who come here and train and she says she's going to be one. She'd make a good 'un too. Sturdy little devil."

Sloane came into the bar. "Seen Sid?" he asked.

Dobson told him that Gregory had gone to his room as he wasn't feeling well. Sloane joined him at the bar.

"What'll you have?" the landlord said, winking at Dobson. Sloane said he would have a tomato juice.

"Have any trouble making the weight?" Dobson asked him.

"No. Haven't changed for three years. Eleven four and a half exactly."

"Good. You won't have to weaken yourself then."

Sloane swallowed his tomato juice.

"By the way, Dave," Dobson said, "there's something I wanted to ask you off the record, just for my own interest. How does all the ballyhoo affect you? Everybody tipping him to win? Do you feel more nervous about this fight than the others?"

Sloane said, "It don't worry me what the papers say. They can't alter the facts, can they? If all the papers in the world say he's going to win it won't help him Tuesday night when I smack him on the chin with my right hook. No, I'm not nervous. He's only human like me."

"That's the spirit," the landlord broke in heartily. "That's the way to look at it."

Dobson thought that he sounded like a hospital visitor giving hollow encouragement to a very sick patient.

Sloane said, "I wish Sid would let me stay in London. I don't see the sense in coming down here. Not in winter."

"Well, you've only got another couple of days."

The landlord said anxiously, "The gym's all right, isn't it?"

"Oh yes, fine," Sloane said.

When he had left the bar the landlord said to Dobson, "I spent a lot of money on that gym. I took a big chance. I hope some of the big-time Americans will come and train here. I'll really clean up then."

Dobson said, "And then you'll be able to retire and write that book."

"Yes," the landlord said vaguely. Then, "What do you think of Sloane's chances? Not much, eh?"

Dobson was irritated by the man's expression. He said, "He's a lot better fighter than most people think."

"Maybe, but the nigger is something out of the ordinary, isn't he?"

Dobson thought, 'If there was such a thing as a collective will which could influence external events, then Sloane is already defeated.' Newspaper references to him read like epitaphs: it was almost impossible to find a bookmaker to take a bet on Simon, so certain did the outcome of the fight appear to be. People who knew nothing of the technicalities of boxing referred to the negro with awe and to Sloane with amused sympathy. He had not even recruited the following that the underdog so often manages to collect in England, those supporters whose longing to see the humble, obscure warrior vanquish the fêted giant overcomes their common sense and makes them defend their hero's chances with illogical vigour.

"Simon might get a shock," Dobson said, but he didn't believe it himself.

A little later he went into the dining-room, where he was joined by Sloane.

"Did you see Gregory?" Dobson asked.

"No. I expect he'll be down. We always eat at this time." But Gregory did not appear. And since the trainer and sparring partners had gone to the cinema they had dinner alone. Dobson noted that though Sloane seemed rather preoccupied he ate with appetite and showed no nervous strain. After the meal Dobson said, "What's Gregory's room number? I'll go up and see if he's all right."

He was beginning to feel a little worried. Gregory had looked badly shaken, though Dobson could not understand why. On first hearing of Tina's presence in London he had not seemed at all disturbed: it was when Dobson had told him exactly where he had seen her that Gregory had seemed so upset. So it was something to do with her being in Archie's. Perhaps she met a lover there or something of that sort. Anyway, he would go and see if Gregory were really ill or not.

He found the room and tapped on the door. He heard

a sound inside and after a slight pause Gregory's voice called, "Yes, who is it?"

"It's me, Dobson. I wondered how you were feeling. Can I get you anything?"

Dobson was quite startled when the door opened and Gregory stood there fully dressed, wearing his heavy motoring coat, thick scarf and gloves.

Dobson said, "I thought you weren't feeling well."

"I've got to go to Town. I'll be back in the morning most likely. Tell Dave, will you? Tell him to go ahead as usual with training tomorrow."

"Yes. Is—nothing wrong, I hope?"

"No, no. Just something I'd forgotten I have to see to." His face was composed but Dobson thought his eyes looked strained, unnaturally bright. Gregory switched off the light in his room and stepped into the corridor. "Are you driving back?" Dobson asked for want of something to say.

Gregory did not seem to hear the question. He descended the stairs without haste but with an air of great purpose. He looked very big and formidable in the motoring coat.

Dobson heard his voice call out something but he could not distinguish the words. Then he heard the door open and close and he knew that Gregory had gone.

CHAPTER XIV

TINA moved aimlessly about the flat flicking cigarette ash carelessly about her, occasionally sitting down only to rise after a few moments to continue her aimless pacing. She was greatly troubled by a sense of impending disaster: she felt that she had lost control of events, that the machine which she had set into motion was now moving independently and was intent on manufacturing her downfall.

What was that man's name, she thought. Anthony somebody. Forster, Faulkner. Something like that. There had been something untrustworthy about him. Something that she had not often encountered in men: a kind of resistance. She had been a fool to give him the cold shoulder. He had been like putty in her hands until then. Once she had annoyed him he had withdrawn from the area of her attraction, had watched her from the outside. A nasty little piece of work who would probably enjoy making trouble.

What would she say to Sid if he found out about her going to Archie's? Tell him that she'd had to go there for some reason: that Louise 'phoned. No, that wouldn't do. He would want to know how Louise had got hold of her number. What could she say? Just tell him that she had been bored to tears and had gone there for half an hour. Maybe that would be the best thing to do: tell him the truth. She would be able to get round him: he would be wild at first but she would be specially nice to him and make him forget it. After all, there was no harm in her going there. She had not done anything except have a couple of gins.

Perhaps that Forster, or whatever his name was, wouldn't say anything. Probably wouldn't. Perhaps she had imagined his hostility. Who was he? He didn't look like one of the boxing people. Yet he had said that it was at a fight he had met her. He had been drinking quite a bit, you could tell by his eyes. Perhaps he was telling lies, not going to see Sid at all. There was nothing to worry about really except . . . She looked at her watch. Seven fifteen. "Oh God," she said, "that will be the next thing."

Johnny Blake would be arriving at any moment. She would have to get rid of him somehow. If Sid found out about him it would really be the end. She'd be back on a high stool in Archie's waiting with Miriam and Louise for some drunk or lecher to pick her up. At this prospect the physical attraction of Johnny Blake became an irrelevancy. She decided that she would have to be quite outspoken with the boy, tell him just how things stood. No vague promises for future meetings: she must tell him to go back to his gymnasium and concentrate on becoming a champion.

She smiled faintly. There would be something ironic in the situation if he were to become Sid's next big money spinner. Yes, she would have to prick his little bubble. It would be doing him a good turn in the long run. Help him to grow up.

Momentarily a shadow of regret darkened her consciousness, but she dismissed it with determination.

'I've too much to lose,' she told herself.

She was lighting another cigarette when the doorbell rang. That would be Johnny, she thought, and she gathered her resolve into a hard, unassailable centre of ruthlessness. With the cigarette between her lips she opened the door. For a moment she was disarmed. He looked far more handsome than she had remembered: the sulkiness that often robbed his features of much of their appeal was gone completely and had been replaced

by an eager, excited look. He was smiling, showing his strong, white teeth, and he seemed to be much less shy than usual. As soon as she opened the door he stepped forward and put his arms about her. She strained away from him, saying through pursed lips, "Mind my cigarette." The rebuke did not seem to offend him at all and his eyes laughed at her as he said, "You smoke too much. You'd never be able to go eight rounds."

She felt the core of ruthlessness begin to soften and she drew hard on her cigarette and said, "Go in there, Johnny, I'm going to make some coffee. I've something to talk to you about."

"So have I," he said. "Wait till you hear it."

While she was preparing the coffee she heard him moving about in the lounge and she heard him singing in his rather nasal but not unpleasant tenor. Then he poked his head round the kitchen door. "Hey," he said, "I've found something out. Listen."

She said, "Go and wait in the lounge." He ignored this. "You know when you left me to come in here, something queer happened." His face was very serious and despite herself she was moved by the beauty of his eyes. "When you walked away from me just now you seemed to take something with you. The air grew colder. Honestly. When you walked away the air grew colder where you'd been." He looked at her, surprised, delighted, waiting for some response.

She said, "Take these cups in."

Her throat was hurting: some emotion for which she had not bargained was gathering like an infection in her throat. She slammed the kitchen door as he left and leaned with her back against it. The centre of resistance that she had created had moved treacherously into her throat and had turned into something else. It was difficult to breathe. She could hear the music playing and Johnny was whistling. Her cigarette dropped to the floor and she could feel her lips trembling. She felt as if she had been

knifed treacherously by one whom she trusted. Bewilderment dazed her and pain increased. It was like a living thing demanding release. Desperately she tried to fight it back, panting with exertion, but it was too strong. A great sigh escaped her lips and she began to cry, choking and gasping; crying as she had not cried since she was a child.

There was a banging on the door: she felt the reverberations against her back.

"Go away," she screamed, "go away, damn you."

Then she was knocked forward by the force of the opening door; something smashed and she was leaning against the table. His hands pulled at her shoulders, his voice spoke. At first she could not understand the words, then she heard, "What is it, Tina? Tina, my darling. Tina, sweetheart. What's the matter? Darling, tell me what's the matter. My darling, my darling."

He crushed her violently against his chest and curiously a part of her mind became detached and she noticed that the endearments were clumsy on his tongue and that she could smell Rainer's hair tonic. She went on weeping after the thing had been released, feeling an almost voluptuous pleasure in self-abandonment. Then she pulled herself away from him and said, "Go out and buy me some cigarettes. My bag. In there. Take the money."

He hesitated.

"Go on," she said, her voice becoming shrill, "cigarettes!"

When he had gone she locked herself in the bathroom. At first she felt too exhausted to do anything, and then with a great effort she forced herself to wash her hands and face and put on some make-up. While she was doing it she heard Johnny return.

He shouted, "Tina! Where are you?"

Wearily she answered, "All right. I'm all right. Shan't be long." But it was almost half an hour before she

felt she could face him again. He was waiting for her impatiently in the lounge.

He said, "I wanted to make the coffee but I don't know how to use that thing you've got in there."

She made a gesture indicating that it was of no consequence and sat down.

"Cigarettes?" he invited eagerly, holding out a packet.

A terrible lassitude enveloped her: she ached as if she had been beaten and her eyelids were weighted with sleep. Johnny said, "Are you all right now?"

She nodded.

He said, "Shall I turn the wireless off?"

She shook her head.

He sat watching her, a frown distressing his brow.

At length she said, "Pour me a drink, will you? Over there. No don't pour it out. Bring it over here. That bottle on the right. A big glass."

She drank the whisky too quickly and it made her cough. But she felt a little more alert after it.

Johnny said cautiously, "What was the matter, Tina? Was it anything I done?"

She said, "Please don't talk for a bit," and she poured herself another drink.

Slowly normality returned and she wondered how she was going to effect his dismissal. She watched him through half-closed eyes, feigning a more potent tiredness than she felt. His look of devoted concern caused irritation to trouble her like an itch. The moment of danger had passed and she felt she was almost strong enough now to attack; but she must make quite sure. She must not risk being betrayed again by that aspect of herself of which she had been scarcely conscious until this evening.

She said deliberately, making her voice sound weak, "I don't feel up to getting you anything to eat. You must be hungry. Why not go out and get yourself something?"

"What about you?" he said. "What will you do? Do

you feel like going out? We could get something in a restaurant. We could get a taxi."

She noticed his mispronunciation of the word 'restaurant' and the self-conscious recklessness of his suggestion that they might take a taxi, and she stored her observations with care, for they were ammunition which could be used to destroy him.

He was common, she thought, and he would always be common. Sid wasn't anything to write home about, but he had a bit of style and what was more he had money. Johnny would never have money and in four or five years he would be just another plug-ugly, his nose all over his face and whatever brains he had been born with knocked out of his head.

She was hardly aware now of the danger from the seed of pain, which had proved that it could fructify in the hardest rock. She felt invulnerable. She lit a cigarette. "I'm not hungry," she told him, "but I'm sure you are. Still, you can get something on your way home."

It took some seconds for the significance of her last sentence to make its impact. She saw bewilderment and the shadow of the familiar sulkiness appear on his face, then he said:

"Do you mean you don't want me to stay tonight?"

"That's right."

"But I thought tonight was going to be our last night?"

She did not answer, so he went on, "That was what you said, tonight would be our last night."

Then quite unexpectedly his expression changed. His former look of cheerfulness and unusual confidence returned and he said, "Listen Tina. I told you I'd got something to tell you, didn't I?" He waited, his eyes on her face begging for encouragement.

She was puzzled by the sudden change and asked warily, "What was it then?"

He sat on the arm of her chair and reached for her

hand. "I've been thinking," he said. "All day I've been thinking about last night. That bit of a row we had."

She withdrew her hand from his and said, "What about it?"

Only for a second was he disconcerted by her unfriendliness, and he continued with the same suppressed excitement and light-heartedness.

"Well, afterwards it was all so—you know—smashing. I thought all day about it. I thought it could always be like that. You and me."

There was a pause which she ended with a brief, "Go on."

"Well, look, I know I'm younger than you but that don't make any difference to the way I feel."

He didn't appear to notice her terse, "That's nice of you."

"I only get four-ten a week at Lester's: it's just part time you see, so's to give me time for training. But that won't be long. Soon I'll be in the money. There's real money in boxing now, even for welterweights, and I'll be in championship class—everybody says so. That means six or seven hundred quid for a fight, maybe more. Then we'd be all right." He hesitated, aware it seemed for the first time of her hard stare of incredulity. Then he finished weakly, "See what I mean?"

"No. What do you mean?" Her words were threaded on thin steel.

His eyes were imploring. The excitement had left them. He said, "We could get spliced."

Against the music that the radio continued to play her shrill laughter was like sudden and vicious lightning in a still sky. Johnny flinched and stared unbelievably at her as she leant far back in the chair, her mouth wide open, her throat vibrating with spasm after spasm of uncontrolled laughter. His face flushed a deep red, then became very pale, and the muscle at the angle of his jaw twitched.

He said, "Shut up!"

She leant forward, her face in her hands and her shoulders shaking. She looked as if she were crying, but when she lifted her discoloured face and said, "Oh God, what a fool, what a fool," it was obvious that her body was still shaken, not by grief but by hysterical mirth. Amazement and fear displaced the anger in Johnny's eyes as he looked at her face. At the sight of him she released a renewed gale of insanely pitched laughter.

"Shut up!" he repeated, but with no effect. Then, perhaps motivated by some memory of such a situation in fiction or in life, he leant forward and gave her a resounding slap across the face. Her voice was silenced immediately like the switching off of a radio. She sat upright, dangerously glittering eyes fixed upon him.

She said in a hoarse and terrible voice, "Get out of here, you little bastard. Go on, get out!"

He remained standing above her, staring with horror at her face. She realised that no man had ever seen her in such circumstances, that somehow he had been able that evening to strip her of all her defences and see her as she really was. Hatred gathered in her; she stood up and faced him, inches only between them, and words were released in a venomous spate.

"Marry you! marry you! An East End gutter boy! Four-ten a week. What a laugh! Sid buys you things like cattle and sends you to the slaughter-house when you're ready for it. That's what people like you are for, to keep me and Sid the way we should be kept. Champion! Champion bloody boy scout!"

She was hardly conscious of the effect her words were having: she simply obeyed the overwhelming necessity to hurt and hurt again. "Talk about smashing nights to me. You with your stinking hair oil, slobbering all over the place. Lerv, lerv, lerv. What the hell do you know about love? What did your scoutmaster teach you, eh? You didn't know the difference between dog and a bitch

until I showed you. Talk about evenings out. Take me to the Hippodrome, would you? I wouldn't be seen dead with you in public. I'd never live it down." She paused for breath and saw through eyes that were blurred with passion his face twisted as if he were in great physical pain. His mouth was pulled down at one corner and his lips a little apart. But his eyes, staring at her with mesmeric fixity, were still informed with fear and amazement rather than pain.

The demon of rage and hatred insisted that she should inflict some further wound that would show him agonised and humiliated before her: but she was more controlled now and able to talk with greater circumspection.

She walked over to the radio and switched it off. Then she lit a cigarette and leant cautiously against the mantelpiece, watching him through the rising blue smoke. His lips moved and abortive speech sounded in his throat: then without having spoken and with an awkward movement of the shoulders as if he were discarding a weight he turned and walked towards the door. His movement affected Tina strangely. She did not want him to go, not because she felt any feeling of remorse or tenderness but because his departure would leave her with an unbearable frustration: she felt she must prevent his going or she would be left alone with the destructive poison of her hatred still within her. She was not a woman reluctant to see her lover go but a cat threatened with the escape of its prey.

She called sharply, "Johnny!"

He stopped at the door and turned his stunned face towards her. Her brain was frantically active, seeking some reasonable pretext for detaining him. She said, "Sure you haven't left anything here?"

Before speaking he swallowed with obvious difficulty, then said hoarsely, "No, there was only my coat."

He looked ridiculously young in his hurt bewilderment, and she felt exquisite cruelty exciting her almost

erotically. She said, "Wait there. I'll just look in the bedroom and make sure."

She went straight to the dressing-table mirror and swiftly repaired her damaged features with powder and lipstick.

When she returned he was still standing by the door in an attitude of strain, his arms extended rigidly by his sides and his fists clenched.

She said, "Relax, Johnny. Why don't you sit down? I've got something to say to you."

"You've said enough," he said.

She put out her hand to take his arm to lead him to a chair but he shook it off and said, "Say what you've got to say and then I can go."

Tina was suddenly weary of the whole business. Irritation usurped the thrilling hatred she had felt. "Oh, for God's sake go then," she said. "I don't ever want to see your stupid face again. Go on. Go back to your slum."

But she had said one word too many. Johnny's pride, the blind, inflexible pride and snobbery of the honest labouring class, had been offended by this last insult. She saw his face adopt the scowling mask of the fighter, one hand seized her shoulder in an agonising grip and she was propelled backwards across the room and sent sprawling into one of the armchairs. She looked up at him as he stood over her in a menacing posture and she felt fear.

"I'll get the police," she shrilled.

He said with huge contempt, "You talk about slums! You talk about manners. You ain't fit to clean our front door-steps. You're filthy, that's what you are. Filthy prostitute!"

Her hatred returned, but in a quite different form. There was no refined sadism, no promise of erotic delight in its exercise. She lashed out at him with her foot, leapt up screaming obscenities, clawing at his face with her fingers, unseeing and unthinking; carried on a great, red tidal-wave of murderous loathing, she flung herself

upon him. He managed to imprison one hand but she succeeded in ripping his face with the nails of the other. She heard him gasp with shock and pain, then what seemed like a great black rock struck her full in the face; brilliant fragments of light whirled in the blackness before her eyes, then her skull opened and let the silent blackness flood inside, and there was no light or sound at all.

CHAPTER XV

GREGORY pressed his foot down harder on the accelerator and felt the car respond like a perfectly trained animal. The headlamps thrust courageous arms of light forward into the darkness, where they occasionally grasped in brightness the figure of a road sign or a lonely cyclist which was dragged swiftly towards the car before speed threw it carelessly back into the night. The engine hummed steadily, vibrant beneath his feet, but he drove automatically, scarcely aware of his own actions or of the light-tunnelled night, so troubled were his thoughts. Repeatedly he tried to assure himself that his behaviour was absurd, that he was acting like a foolish and inexperienced youth, but this did nothing to expel the anxieties that invaded his mind. The conviction that Tina was deceiving him grew stronger every moment. The fact that he himself had first met her in Archie's club and that she had at once invited him to pick her up supported his doubts. Why should she go there unless it were to seek male company? There were always men in places like that looking for casual adventure.

She was such a peach too, he told himself; somebody was bound to try to pick her up the moment she showed her face. That was why he had forbidden her to go there. Then with a groan he told himself that he could hardly blame her. He was old and she was young and lovely. He had been crazy to take up with a girl like that. Sooner or later she was bound to double-cross him. It was only human nature. He should have found himself somebody a bit older: a nice comfortable widow, not too old of course, who would have looked after him well and not

given him any trouble; but immediately the memory of Tina's beauty came to him with poignancy and he knew he could not bear to be without her. The small seed of mistrust that Dobson had sowed now flowered fantastically and he was possessed by alarming visions and fears which he could not suppress or mitigate. Memory became vindictive and whispered terrible rumours in his credulous ear. What about the time he had gone to Amsterdam? Three whole days and nights she had been left alone in the flat and he had never had the slightest suspicion of her. She could have had somebody in then and he would never have known a thing about it. There had been innumerable nights which he had spent away from home, giving her perfect opportunities to deceive him. Perhaps she had a lover, a regular, who waited anxiously for Gregory's trips out of town which would leave the coast clear. It was probably someone he, Gregory, had never seen, somebody who belonged to Tina's past: a flashy con man or out-of-work theatrical, somebody who would be only too ready to ingratiate himself with Gregory in the hope of a free drink or of tapping him for a quid, somebody in cheap ready-mades or imitation tweeds, down at heel, inferior, but with one possession denied to himself—the enviable condition of youth.

Gregory drove on at a reckless speed. He did not know precisely what he expected to find when he reached home. His doubts had engendered visions of vague obscenity which always remained a little out of focus so that he could not be aware of the exact nature of the actions or the identity of the protagonists. Within his breast pain and anger wrestled for domination, while over the arena of their conflict hung a shadow of despair. His imagination refused to move beyond these images and re-establish contact with probability. He could not think what his course of action would be if he were to discover Tina with her lover, or what he would say to her if he found her alone.

As he entered the suburbs he slowed down, not out of respect for the speed limit but automatically, his action governed by fear of what he would find when he reached home. Part of him wished that he had not left Brighton, even hinted that it was not too late to turn back, that he could return to London on Monday as expected and conceal his suspicions in the hope that they would die. No news was good news: ignorance was bliss. But this sensible, if timid, aspect of himself was making only a formal gesture which was not for a moment taken seriously by his jealousy and the sense of having been deceived.

When he drew up outside the block of flats he saw that there was a light in his windows. She—or they—were in there, he thought. He found that he was trembling, and despite the cold night his underclothing stuck to his perspiring flesh uncomfortably. And the same reluctance that made him reduce the speed of his car held him back from entering the building. He climbed out of the car and stood for a time looking up at the lighted windows. And then he got back into the car and drove it into the garage. After that there was nothing for him to do but to go inside.

As the lift carried him up to his flat he felt a great weakness pressing on bone and muscle and a treacherous paralysis creeping over his mind and will. He tried feebly to summon up some kind of energy and anger, but the strain of the last few hours had left him in a torpid state which amounted almost to indifference. The lift came to rest and he stepped out and walked slowly along the thick-carpeted corridor towards the door of his flat. There he paused and felt for his key. Sound from behind the door jerked up his head. The door was opened precipitately and a man came out so quickly that he staggered against Gregory. Gregory stared in disbelieving astonishment. His brain spun like a crazy, glittering propeller with recognition motionless at its centre. Johnny Blake, too, stopped in shocked surprise and they stood staring at each other, without saying a word, for what seemed to Gregory

a great length of time. Then suddenly Blake moved, pushed past Gregory who heard his footsteps pounding the stairs as he fled.

The door had been left open and Gregory went inside. His heart was throbbing painfully and his eyes were blurred with nervous and emotional fatigue.

In the doorway of the lounge he met Tina. She was walking unsteadily and her face was ghastly. A trickle of blood ran down her chin from one corner of her mouth and her hair was dishevelled. At the sight of him her eyes widened and she pushed past him without a word and he heard her enter the bathroom. He sat down heavily in one of the chairs. There was a bottle of whisky on the table, but he had not the strength to pour himself a drink. He did not know for how long he had sat there in that state of coma when he heard Tina leave the bathroom and go to the bedroom. He felt a movement of life returning to his will, and he knew he had to find out from her the reason for Johnny Blake's presence and for her visit to Archie's club. With a great effort he shook off some of his weariness and drank half a tumblerful of whisky. Whatever happened he would have to keep his temper, he reminded himself. There might be a reasonable explanation for everything. He had to keep a clear head at all cost.

Tina had undressed and was lying on top of the bed, wearing her dressing-gown: her face was turned away from him, pressed into the pillow, and he noticed that she had tidied her hair. He stood over her, waiting for her to move, but she remained quite still.

He said, "Tina."

She did not answer. Then he took her by the shoulders and pulled her towards him without unnecessary roughness. Her face looked much older than he had seen it look before and her lip was badly swollen, though it was no longer bleeding. She stared up at him with watchful fear: then she suddenly began to cry.

She seized his hand and began to say through her sobs, "Oh Sid, oh Sid," over and over again.

Pity took him unawares, importunate as desire. Involuntarily he began to stroke her hair and speak words of comfort. "It's all right, honey," he said, "it's all right. Don't cry, honey. Everything's all right."

He had been prepared for almost anything except this. He had expected an unholy row, words smashed at each other's face like broken glass, or perhaps an attempt to get round him with the apparatus of her sex, but not this defenceless pain and distress igniting an alien and overwhelming emotion that he vaguely knew must be love.

"All right, honey," he said. "Everything's going to be all right."

She lifted her face, discoloured and misshapen, and it twisted with a further emotional spasm of a different kind, hatred and venom. "The young swine!" she said. "I can hardly believe he dared to come here like that."

Gregory was bewildered. "Who? What do you mean? You mean Blake?"

"Oh God," she said, "he was horrible." And she began to cry again.

He shook her shoulder. "What do you mean? Listen. What do you mean? How did he—what was he doing here?"

When she had stopped weeping she said with something of her old cynicism and contempt, "What do you think he was doing here, playing bridge?"

"But how did he get here? Did you ask him?"

Tina looked astonished, incredulity seeming to hold back speech for a moment: then she said, "Ask him! What do you think I am? Ask a cheap little corner boy like that to come here! Of course I didn't ask him."

"But what—how did he get here? You mean he came. Just like that, without anybody asking him."

"Of course he did. He knew you were away, didn't

he? I told you the first time I saw him I didn't like the look of him."

Her eyes did not leave Gregory's face and he was too confused to notice how quickly she had shed her distress.

"Tell me what happened," he said. "Tell me exactly. I can't get things straight."

Tina said, "I can hardly tell what happened myself, it was so sudden and horrible. Round about a couple of hours ago I was just going to fix myself something to eat when the door-bell rang and there he was. I asked him what he wanted and he said something or other about a message for you. I don't remember exactly what it was he said. Well, I remembered you told me to be friendly and so on because he was going to be our meal ticket, so I asked him in for a cup of coffee. I suppose I was a damn fool. I shouldn't have asked him in."

"Go on. What happened then?"

"Use your sense. What do you think happened? He made a pass at me of course. I told him where he got off and then he turned really nasty. Said he would tell you I'd asked him here myself unless I gave him what he wanted."

"Johnny Blake said that! I can't believe it. He's not—he's such a kid."

Tina's voice became shrill and tearful. "Are you calling me a liar? You ask me what happened and when I tell you you call me a liar!"

"No no, I'm not calling you a liar. It's just that I can't understand it. Go on, tell me the rest."

"Well, naturally I told him to get to hell out of it and he grabbed me and we fought. He hit me—look, you can see where he hit me."

Gregory looked at the swollen lip. "Yes, I can see he hit you," he said. "You'd better get to bed."

She squeezed his hand and said, "Oh Sid, I'm glad you're back. I don't know what I'd have done if you hadn't come."

He frowned. "But he was going out. He was on his way out as I reached the door. It wasn't me coming that saved you." His face set hard and his eyes narrowed.

"He heard you, Sid," she said quickly. "He heard you coming."

"What? My steps on those carpets? He heard me right from in here?" Gregory's voice was suspicious.

"No. No, of course not. I mean your car. I heard the car draw up and I told him it was you. That's what scared him. That's why he got out."

Gregory withdrew his hand from hers and said, "You'd better get to bed. You look played out."

He undressed slowly without speaking, and joined her in bed. He lay in the darkness feeling the weight of unanswered questions grow like a tumour in his brain. The steady rise and fall of her breathing did not persuade him that she slept. He could feel her wakefulness and watchfulness alive in the room. At last he said, "You awake?"

She did not answer.

"Tina!" he said in a loud whisper.

Her voice was very sleepy, improbably sleepy in view of the time she had been in bed. "Did you say something?"

"Wake up. There's something I want to know."

"Go on then."

He could sense her wariness. "What were you doing in that joint in Paddington, Archie's or whatever you call it?"

"Oh Sid, don't go on. I've had more than I can stand tonight and I'm so tired." She had adopted her little-girl voice, petulant and disarming.

"What were you doing there?" It was evident that he was not to be so easily placated.

She said, "Miriam, a girl I used to know, 'phoned me. She said it was important; she'd got to see me right away.

I couldn't have her here so I met her at Archie's: that's where she 'phoned from."

"How did she know your number? I told you you hadn't got to have anything to do with any of that gang any more."

"Well, I met her once in Oxford Street and gave her it without thinking. I never thought she'd bother to ring. She never would have done except she's in awful trouble."

"What's up with her?"

"She's going to have a baby."

"So what? You're not a midwife."

"Oh Sid, you're just being silly. She wanted to know if I knew anybody that could help her."

He said, "I told you never to go there again." His voice was ominous.

Tina began to weep softly.

"For Christ's sake," Gregory said without sympathy.

"Oh Sid," she wailed, "don't be so horrid. I can't stand it. What have I done? I only went there for half an hour because she sounded so upset. What harm is there in that? Oh, I've had such an awful day and I was so glad when you came back and now you're being horrible to me all about nothing."

Her grief became cataclysmic. The sobs and despairing wails that shook her frame seemed far too anguished to be assumed, and Gregory was again surprised by a sudden flowering of tenderness which instantly neutralised his jealousy and suspicion. Again he began to perform the rites of consolation, stroking and murmuring, until the storm of tears abated and Tina lay in his arms, quiet save for an occasional tremulous sigh or piteous gulp. Gregory's head ached badly and sleep was an immeasurable distance away, but the terrible sense of loss and betrayal had left him. His doubts might return, but for the moment their presence no longer troubled him. He

tightened his arms about the now sleeping Tina and smiled fondly, and perhaps a little foolishly. "Poor kid," he thought. "She's had a bad time."

Then he thought of Johnny Blake, at first with bewilderment, then with vengeful wrath. He would fix that young man, he promised himself.

CHAPTER XVI

DAVE SLOANE moved quickly across the hotel bedroom when the telephone bell began to ring.

"That you, Agnes? How are you, ducks? Yes, I'm fine. Just been having a sleep. I'll be leaving for the hall in about an hour. How are the kids? Good. Are you going to let them listen in? Oh, get away, it won't do them any harm to stay up late once in a while. . . . Listen, have you seen the papers?" His voice was excited and pleased. "Phil Dobson—he's one of the best writers there is—he tips me to win. Listen to this—hang on a minute." He snatched a newspaper from the pile which lay on the dressing-table and arranged it on his lap. "Are you there, Agnes? Listen. 'After seeing Sloane work out in private against an assortment of sparring partners specially chosen for their resembling Babe Simon in style and tactical methods, I no longer feel that this is going to be the one-horse race that all the experts seem to anticipate. I have never seen the British champion in better condition and his right-hand punching is tremendously powerful. Tonight he will be fighting to a carefully prearranged plan which is calculated to enable him to make the fullest possible use of his assets—fifteen years' campaigning experience against top-class opposition, his ringcraft, stamina and punching power. Babe Simon is undoubtedly an extraordinary fighting machine, but he is also human, and if Sloane lands his right hook fair and square on the negro's jaw, the Babe will need no lullaby to rock him into slumber.'

"That's Dobson, and he knows what he's talking about. He's right too, duckie. I'm going to win tonight . . .

Now listen, don't you worry. This time tomorrow you'll be on top of the world—on top of the world with the champion of the world. I'll be coming home after the fight. Gregory wants me to come back here for the night but I'll get a taxi home, or maybe somebody'll drive me in their car. Now don't you worry. It's in the bag . . . Yes, yes, I'll be careful all right. Cheerio, ducks."

He replaced the receiver and looked at the newspaper, smiling happily. "Good old Phil," he said aloud. "The only one to stick by me."

He put the paper back with others and shuffled across the room, aiming a few hooks and jabs at an imagined opponent. Then he lay down on top of the bed, waiting for Gregory to arrive to take him to the arena.

He was not nervous, only excited and anxious for the few remaining hours before the fight to pass quickly. At the weighing-in ceremony that morning he had seen Simon for the first time.

A queer-looking bloke, he thought. Not like a nigger really except for his colour. He, Sloane, had fought a lot of niggers in his time but he had never seen one like Simon. Didn't look like a fighter at all. If he had been white he would look more like an actor, or something. They said he was unbeatable; but they'd said that about lots of fighters before now. They had said it about Louis before Schmeling stopped him, about Carnera before Maxie Baer punched him right out of the fight game, about Peter Kane before he came up against Benny Lynch. Nobody was unbeatable. It didn't matter who it was; if you hit him hard enough in the right spot he would go down and stay down.

He had shaken hands with Simon at the weigh-in. Simon had said, 'Good luck,' but he hadn't said anything to the reporters. Just looked snooty at them. That was a change for a Yank. But he seemed a nice enough bloke. Funny him not being married or anything, a good-looking fellow like that. You'd think with his money and

everything there'd be hundreds of women after him. Still, that was his affair. In a way it helped a fighter, to be married; married to a good wife that was, with a good home and kids. It helped because you weren't only fighting for yourself like a single bloke; you had others to think of.

Agnes and the kids, they'd be all right once he'd got the title. No fighting for them. They'd be doctors or lawyers or something. Maybe they could box a bit as amateurs at college. It was a good game and made a man of you: but no pro fighting for them.

The telephone bell again shocked the silence in the room. It was Gregory announcing that he would be calling round in half an hour. "O.K., Sid," Sloane said. "Yes, I'm all right. You seen Dobson's piece about me? Yes, I know he's right, but it's nice to have somebody else besides me believe it. . . . No, no, I didn't mean that. I meant you as well when I said 'me.' Should have said 'us.' Yes, she 'phoned a few minutes ago. Bit worried like she always is but she'll be all right once it's over. Right, see you soon."

Not long now; not long to the dressing-room, the smell of massage oils, the noise of the crowd outside, muffled, rising and falling like the sea. Not long before the careful bandaging of hands and the journey to the ring, to stand alone beneath the impartial lights, magnified to colossal proportions by the fixed regard of fifty thousand pairs of eyes. Not long to the time of waiting, the master of ceremonies bellowing the introductions, necessary yet unnecessary, and the vast inflated moments of waiting for the first gong. Not long to the tenseness, the watchfulness, the impersonal fury, the first blow and counterblow. Not long to the fight.

Sloane resumed his position on the bed and closed his eyes. He breathed quite easily, for he was not afraid. Just another fight, he told himself. But the excitement

he felt was stronger than usual and he knew that the night's encounter would be something more than that.

"Sooner him than me," said the cab driver, biting angrily at his sausage sandwich.

The coffee-stall proprietor demurred. "Oh, I don't know. I'd do a lot for seven thousand quid. After all, the nigger won't kill him."

"Not so sure about that."

"Course he won't. In fact I was reading a paper to-day that said Sloane had a very fair chance of winning!"

The cab driver choked. "Fair chance of winning!" His voice was derisive. "He's got about as much chance of licking Simon as I have of swimming the Atlantic. You don't want to take no notice of the papers. If you believe them you'd believe anything."

"Anybody'd think you wasn't English the way you talk. Who's going to stick up for Sloane if his own countrymen won't?"

"It ain't a question of sticking up for your country. Anybody'd think it was a war the way you talk. It's just a fight and Sloane is going to be licked. It don't do any good to kid yourself about it."

"I'm not so sure."

"Well, money talks. Tell you what I'll do: I'll give you three to one—thirty bob to your ten bob—Simon beats him inside the distance."

"Right."

Their hands clasped over the chipped mugs on the counter and the wager was sealed.

Irene, sister of Johnny Blake, pushed past the standing passengers in the Tube train and gained a vacant seat, reserving the next one to it for her friend and workmate, Doris, who was following close behind.

"We would get in a non-smoker," said Doris disgustedly as she settled down by Irene's side.

"You smoke too much," said Irene and opened her evening newspaper. She chewed gum rhythmically as she read.

A hoarse voice from the platform beseeched the unwary to mind the doors, which then closed, and the train moved out of the station.

"Oh look," said Irene. "Isn't he nice!"

"Who?" inquired her companion, peering at the newspaper. Then in scandalised tones, "Irene! He's a black man!"

"Well, what if he is? I think he's smashing."

Doris's indignation vanished almost at once and she giggled and said, "Let's have another look . . . he don't look much like a boxer, does he? Champion of the world, too, it says."

Irene read aloud, "An exclusive picture of Babe Simon, world's middleweight champion, who defends his title against Dave Sloane tonight.' Babe. What a silly name for a man like that."

"How would you like to nurse him on your lap?" Doris giggled again.

"Don't be daft," Irene said with impatient scorn. Then, reflectively, "I hope he wins."

A little farther down the carriage a man in a commissioner's uniform was saying, "It ought to be stopped. What they have a Board of Control for? It's all a racket. The Yids are behind it like everything else."

"Ah," said his audience, rolling a cigarette.

"This fella Simon might injure him. It's happened before. Injure him serious: blind him or something. These niggers are different. They ain't like us. Primitive, that's what they are."

"Savages," his companion contributed.

The commissioner said, "Of course there's a lot of funny business goes on that we don't know anything about. It wouldn't surprise me if the fight was fixed. You never know with the Yids: do anything for money."

"Filthy lucre," supplemented his friend.

"Ten guineas for a seat! Anybody as can pay that much must be crooked. It ain't a sport any more. Big business, that's what it is."

The train stopped and the commissionaire, still frowning with disapproval, shouldered his way out of the compartment.

Doris was saying with affected carelessness, "Is your brother still boxing?"

Irene replied with asperity, "Oh, don't talk to me about him."

"Why, what's up?"

"He gets worse than ever. Been slopping around all week-end like a bad cold. Can't get a civil word out of him; not that he ever was a little ray of sunshine."

"He always seemed all right to me," said Doris.

Her friend regarded her with contempt. "Any man that didn't actually spit in your eye would seem all right to you."

This provoked an indignant protest and counter-accusation, and the two girls embarked upon one of the frequent and inconclusive squabbles from which their friendship seemed to draw nourishment.

Meanwhile Johnny Blake, the forgotten cause of their dispute, was seated in one of the many indistinguishable snack bars near his home, an expression of dejection darkening his features, and a large cup of tepid coffee untasted on the counter before him.

Since the nightmarish evening at Tina's flat he had scarcely slept, and the nights had become grotesquely inflated, populous with shapes of evil and menace. The respite brought by daylight was limited only to a more coherent and therefore controllable misery; but the events of that evening remained totally inexplicable. His mind was obsessed with countless unanswered and unanswerable questions. Why had she wept? Why had

she changed so suddenly and so terribly? Why, after showing him such love, had she been filled with hatred, wanting to hurt him so irredeemably? The question marks, like great iron hooks, hung painfully upon his spirits and seemed unlikely ever to be removed. His distress was too acute for him to attempt to dissemble and he knew that his mother was worried about him. But he could not even attempt to reassure her.

That his boxing career was finished seemed as certain as it was unimportant. When he thought of it at all it was with slight impatience, as though he were an adult being worried by the unsympathetic preoccupations and ambitions of a youth whom he hardly knew. His entire being was absorbed by passionate love, frustration and pain. Sometimes he would deliberately remind himself of the damaging things she had said, would recall the look on her face of almost diabolical hatred and contempt which had so shocked him; but he could not feel any answering feeling of loathing, only more pain and bewilderment.

His vague reverie was broken by the entry of three older men, one of whom spoke to him. "Hullo, Johnny, you look real browned off. Anybody would think it was you who was to fight Simon tonight."

Blake grinned feebly and said, "Hullo."

The men ordered cups of tea and cheese cakes.

"Going to listen in?" said the one who had addressed him before.

Blake nodded, "I suppose so."

One of the other men said, "Poor bleeder'll get murdered."

Dave Sloane would be on his way to the hall, Johnny thought, and a faint stirring of interest and sympathetic nervousness distracted him. On his way to the fight of his life, with practically everyone in the country thinking he was a sacrifice. He was a tough one, was Dave. Nothing ever seemed to worry him: but no man could

read the papers, seeing them all say he was a lamb being led to the slaughter, without feeling some kind of fear or depression. Perhaps he would be able to feel it when the fight began: everybody in the hall waiting for him to be destroyed. Nobody's nerves could stand up to that.

"I'll lay you five to one it don't go more than three rounds," one of the men at the counter was saying.

"Very kind of you, I'm sure. Nothing doing."

"It ain't a fight; it's a massacre. What do you think, Johnny?"

Blake said. "I don't know. Never seen Simon."

"No, but you've seen the names of them he's beat. You've seen his record. Who did Sloane ever beat?"

Blake got to his feet. "Quite a few," he said. "You don't get to be champion without beating somebody. Well, so long."

As he went out the girl who served behind the counter removed his neglected cup of coffee and poured it down the sink.

"I think the whole thing's crazy," she said, adding with tremendous scorn and an expression of distaste, "boxing!"

At seven-thirty, while Sloane, covered by blankets, was lying on the massage table of his dressing-room waiting for the preliminary bouts to end, his name was being spoken by many voices and in many places. Brisk cockney voices tossed the name about in the bars and cafés of Deptford, Aldgate and the Mile End Road; well-fed, expensive voices pronounced it over sparkling glass, cutlery and prim flowers, laid out on surgically white tablecloths; it was rendered practically unrecognisable by many dialects, and translated into many languages; spoken in rhythmic railway compartments and in dignified clubs, in parlours and in kitchens, above the clouds

and deep below the earth by sweating men who laboured there.

Dave Sloane was famous, but his fame possessed one peculiar feature. It is doubtful whether anyone envied it him.

There were, however, a few groups where the mention of his name would have elicited nothing but a look of impatient interrogation. One of these groups was stationed at the bar of the Barleycorn talking loudly against the strains of a piano accordion which seemed to blend with thick tobacco smoke into a false but plausible melancholy.

A voice, which Dobson would have recognised as that of the predatory and incorrigible Ransome, rose clear above the others: "But my dear fellow, let me assure you that such was not the case. I have known Dorset Morgan personally for more years than I care to remember, and if there had ever been even a rumour of . . . Oh no, believe me: there's not a shred of—yes, that's my glass. So kind of you. Cheers."

A shrill female voice*cried, "Gin, my dear, lashings of gin. It just wasn't true." Then laughter like splintering glass.

Ransome again: "You should have seen it in the old days. What an assembly. Every man there a real artist. No bloody insurance agents up for the night from Tooting. Every man there a master in his own medium. Those days are gone, gone with the wind."

The accordion wept for the days that had passed and the large clock on the wall dispassionately recorded the minutes that were passing. Eyes turned to its implacable face and voices called urgently, "Bitter, bitter, bitter."

The fierce little bell of the cash register rang triumphantly every few seconds and the noise and the smoke thickened.

Nobody spoke the name of Dave Sloane, who still lay

on his massage table waiting to be summoned to the ring.

He could hear, very faintly, the sound of the crowd as they encouraged the preliminary fighters to give of their best, and every so often the clang of the bell signalling the beginning or end of a round. Youngsters, he thought, maybe their first chance on a really big bill. There would be some great excitement in young hearts, and some great disappointments too when the night was finished. You had to be able to take the disappointments if you were going to make the top flight. You had to have the stuff in you that made you come back after a bad beating, otherwise it was no good. You might as well pack the game up. He'd had plenty of set-backs but he'd got there somehow. Here he was tonight, waiting to fight for the world title. Well, you couldn't get much farther than that except win it.

He became aware that he was sweating under the blanket and that his mouth was very dry.

"Get me a gargle," he said to Hyams, his trainer, who was sitting close by reading a newspaper.

He rolled the water on his palate and throat, then spat it out.

"How are you feeling?" Hyams said.

"Fine."

Sloane lay back and thought that he would be glad when the fight was on. "What time is it?" he said after a few moments had passed.

"Nearly eight-thirty. Not much longer now."

"I'm going to lick him," Sloane said silently, 'I know it.'

He was nervous, that much he admitted, but not scared. It was the long wait that was getting him. Once he was in there he would be all right. He had been waiting for this chance for a long time and he wasn't going to mess it up. He was going to lick that nigger. He was going to stop him.

"What time is it?" he said again.

"Take it easy, son," Hyams said in a bedside voice. "Won't be long now."

Not long. It was all right for Hyams to talk. This was just another job for him. His fighting days were over and he lived on memories of his fights, forgotten by everyone except himself and perhaps his opponents if they were still alive. Not long when it was just a job like any other, but when it was the thing you'd been waiting for for years it was a hell of a long time. Every minute was like a day. He wasn't scared, but he'd waited so long for this night that he was bound to feel keyed up.

How would Agnes be feeling? Poor old girl went through it all right when he was fighting. Not like some fighters' wives. They were tough as nails, some of them, but not Agnes. She didn't like the game: she had no understanding of it. She just thought it was a matter of bashing at each other till the blood flowed.

She would never understand that it wasn't like that at all and that you weren't really hurting each other, except sometimes by accident. A punch on the jaw never hurt anyone. In the excitement of the fight you never felt it. The way the boys at the back of the hall yelled you'd think it was them that were being walloped. That was why people like Agnes didn't like boxing. They judged it by the kind of people who went to watch boxing, and some of them were terrible. But they weren't really boxing people. When you got down to it you found that they didn't know any more about boxing than Agnes did. They just wanted to see some blood.

Anyway, he would sooner have Agnes the way she was than like some of the hard-looking women you saw at fights. What would she be doing now? Getting really fidgety: telling herself she wouldn't have the radio on but keeping her eye on the clock for when the broadcast began. Poor old girl; it was a shame she had to worry like that. Soon all the worry would be over for her. Once

he'd got that world title, two or three fights and he would retire.

The door of the dressing-room opened and the noise of the crowd surged in, then receded as the door was shut. Sloane sat up on the table. Gregory, with two other men, smiled at him. "Bandages," Gregory said.

Hyams stood up and took from his bag the bandages that were to be wrapped round Sloane's hands. Sloane felt nervousness tighten in his diaphragm and he wiped his damp brow.

"O.K.," he said and extended his hands while Gregory, Simon's manager and the Boxing Board of Control official watched the operation performed.

'Not long now,' he thought. 'Not long.'

CHAPTER XVII

THE last bout before the big fight was over. The crowd applauded the winner but their cheers were perfunctory; they had come to see Babe Simon hammer the British champion into submission, and their vociferous interest was being reserved for this, the main spectacle. The cheering sank into an even swell of sound as the lights in the stadium came to life and the great arc lamp over the ring was dimmed. Through the faint blue mist of tobacco smoke row upon row of faces could be seen stretching back to the furthestmost tiers from whence the ring would look no larger than a cigarette packet. The appearance of the two main contestants was being delayed, perhaps deliberately, so that the excitement of anticipation could become more intense. Suspense tightened, became palpable, part of the smoky air and the low noise of shuffling feet and voices that erupted occasionally into sudden, almost hysterical bursts of shouting and laughter. A small party of men, prosperous in dinner jackets, smoking cigars, arrived at the ringside. They had paid ten guineas each for their seats but they had not troubled to watch the supporting contests. A few half-hearted jeers from the back of the hall greeted their arrival but they did not seem to notice, secure and arrogant in the knowledge of their wealth.

Philip Dobson wriggled uncomfortably in his seat. He lit a cigarette, but after the first taste of the tobacco he threw it down and crushed it beneath his foot. 'I must pull myself together,' he told himself; but the tension that dried his mouth and sent sweat running from his pores did not relax.

It was only another fight, he thought. Sloane was a dumb fighter. There was nothing to get excited about. He had been mad to tip Sloane to win but it had made a story. McLaughlin needn't have printed it if he had thought the risk of being made to look foolish was too great. Why the hell did they have to take so long getting started? How would Sloane be feeling in the dressing-room?

The thought moved swiftly from brain to nerves, stirred uncomfortably in bowels. He wriggled again and reached for another cigarette. 'I've too much damned imagination for this game,' he thought.

The reporter sitting next to him said, "You look het up, Phil. Not feeling too happy about your little prophecy?"

Dobson said, "I wish they'd get on with it."

As he spoke, a fanfare of trumpets sounded and, turning quickly, he saw, walking down one of the aisles leading from the dressing-rooms to the ring, Dave Sloane accompanied by Gregory and two white-sweatered seconds. The noise from the audience subsided for a fraction of a second, then rose to a deafening crescendo. As Sloane drew nearer to the ring Dobson could see that his face was very pale and the muscles at the angle of his jaws were bunched into hard knots. He was wearing a new red silk dressing-gown and a large towel was draped about his neck.

No sooner had he mounted the steps to the ring than there was another fanfare of trumpets and a renewed volume of applause as Babe Simon and his retinue approached. Simon was wearing an immaculate robe of white wool and his face was quite impassive. Dobson was again startled by the fineness of his features, the total absence of the facial characteristics shared by nearly all fighters.

Next began the seemingly interminable ceremony of introducing from the ring various champions of the

past. One by one they stepped forward as the master of ceremonies bawled their names and they acknowledged bashfully or with some show of assurance the polite recognition of the crowd. Dobson watched Simon and Sloane closely, trying to recognise some sign of their emotional and mental state, but they both seemed resigned to the lengthy preliminaries and showed no obvious nervousness. The negro stood in his corner listening to his manager, or rather he appeared to be making a polite pretence of listening. He seemed perfectly relaxed, even a little bored. Sloane sat on his stool, his face quite expressionless, nodding occasionally as Gregory spoke rapidly in his ear. At last the introductions of the ex-boxers were completed, and the new gloves were fixed on Sloane's and Simon's hands. The master of ceremonies then announced in an impassioned bellow that the audience was about to witness a fifteen-round contest for the middleweight championship of the world: he read out the exact weights of the fighters and commented on the colours of the trunks that each was wearing. As the master of ceremonies left the ring, exuding portentous self-satisfaction, the referee beckoned the boxers to the centre, where they touched gloves, listened to his brief warnings, and returned to their corners. The fight was about to begin.

Dobson sat strained and perspiring, his eyes fixed on Simon, who had slipped off his robe and was waiting with his back to his opponent, hands resting on the upper rope. He was magnificently built, very tall with wide shoulders and slim waist and legs.

The lights in the main body of the hall were extinguished and the arc lamp over the ring cascaded down its full power over the small roped platform. Sloane was dancing up and down on his toes working his arms and shoulders to free them from any possible stiffness. The sound of the gong signalling the beginning of the fight brought a curious shock of relief to Dobson. The fighters

left their corners and faced one another and it seemed to Dobson that a vast sigh came from the audience, but it might have been imagination, the projection of his own nervous condition.

Simon moved very easily, his chin resting on his left shoulder, his gloves weaving patterns of menace in the air. Sloane fell immediately into a crouch and began to edge towards the negro, watchful and determined. Though of shorter stature than Simon he looked very powerful and the muscles of his back swelled under the pallid, gleaming skin. He struck with his left at the body and Simon moved away from the blow, evading it with almost contemptuous ease. Sloane feinted with his left, again to the body, but swung a right hook to the jaw which Simon slipped beneath, jabbing the Englishman with a stiff left to the solar-plexus.

During the brief interval at the end of the round Dobson, oblivious to the excited chatter which swirled about him, kept his eyes on the ring. Both fighters looked unperturbed as they submitted to the ministrations of their seconds. It seemed to Dobson that Simon was not giving of his best: he seemed quite content to score with straight lefts and evade the blows of his opponent. This, according to the reports of his other fights, was not his usual method. Perhaps he meant to reprieve the Englishman. Echoes of ugly rumours troubled Dobson. It had been whispered that the fight was 'fixed': that the negro had not trained properly. But two seconds after the gong had sounded for the second round such doubts were swept away.

Simon came from his corner moving quickly, though with perfect poise; flashed a left hook to Sloane's body and, as the Englishman's guard dropped, sent his right with devastating force to the jaw. Sloane fell on his face and remained motionless for five seconds. At the count of eight he was on one knee, shaking his head. Then he

rose to meet the ferocious assault that was hurled at him. Without any flurry and with terrible precision, Simon manoeuvred his opponent into a corner, and smashed savage blows home, switching the barrage from head to body, until Sloane dropped to his knees.

Dobson, writhing in his seat, groaned aloud. The reporter who sat next to him shouted to Sloane, who was beginning to rise, "Stay down, you fool, stay down!"

The negro crossed the ring, measured Sloane quite calmly and methodically with his left, and crashed a powerful short right to the jaw. Then the almost impossible occurred, which changed the crowd from a noisy gathering of ordinary human beings into a shrieking pack of dervishes. Sloane reeled away from the punch, struck the ropes and bounded back with a tremendous left swing which struck the astonished Simon full in the mouth. The negro staggered and his gum shield went skidding across the canvas. For a second his guard was down and Sloane, veteran of over two hundred fights, was not likely to miss such an opportunity. He leaped forward, slinging the right hook which was his most damaging punch, and the next moment Simon was sprawling on the canvas.

The crowd were crazed with excitement: there were frenzied yells exploding like fireworks, and scarcely one person remained seated. Programmes and hats were flung high into the air and it was impossible even at the ringside to hear the voice of the referee as he intoned the passing seconds. But Simon rose before the ten seconds limit was reached and the fight continued.

Both boxers were more cautious now. The negro returned to his former style of using a fast straight left and keeping out of range of counter-blows, and the second round came to an end without further excitement.

Dobson was not unduly elated. He knew how fortunate Sloane had been to land that one desperate blow and

how unlikely it was that Simon would permit another opportunity to arise. But Sloane had shown how tough he was and had proved that he would be dangerous so long as the fight was in progress.

The third round was comparatively quiet. It was obvious that Simon did not intend to take any chances and, while he continued to outbox Sloane, he kept a wary eye on the latter's right hand. Sloane did not seem much the worse for the punishment he had taken in the second round and he did succeed in landing one good right to the body at the end of the third.

The reporter said to Dobson, "It's only a matter of time now. The nigger got a bit of a scare in the second but he'll soon see that Sloane isn't able to do that more than once in a fight."

Dobson said, "Sloane's tough. He might do it yet."

The gong sounded and the fight was on again. Immediately there was a great roar from the crowd as Sloane rushed straight from his corner and swung a left and right at the negro's head. Simon rode away from the punches, but the second one half caught him on the temple and he retreated swiftly into the centre of the ring. Dobson noticed that his expression did not change. Even at such moments as these his features retained their curious aloofness and look of faint scorn.

It became apparent that Sloane was very confident and he moved after his opponent, taking straight lefts one after the other to the face without showing any sign of discomfort. Again towards the end of the round he managed to penetrate Simon's defence with a heavy right to the ribs and for a moment it seemed that the negro was hurt, until he retaliated with two lefts to Sloane's face and quick right upper-cut under the heart that caused Dobson to gasp in sympathy with Sloane.

Excitement mounted, electrifying the atmosphere. To many of the spectators it seemed that the outcome of the fight was now by no means certain, though the more

expert insisted that it was only a matter of time before the negro brought the contest to a finish. Secretly Dobson thought this too, but his admiration was so great for Sloane's courage that he refused to voice his opinion. And obstinately a part of his mind kept insisting that Sloane might win; that he might land another lucky punch and so finish the fight.

Simon came out of his corner for the fifth round with a greater air of determination than he had so far shown. He swayed before Sloane, tempting the Englishman to strike, and when the expected straight left came he slipped inside it and drove his right to the body with the speed and precision of a piston. Before Sloane had time to recover, a perfectly timed left hook struck him on the jaw and he was down on his haunches. Dobson could see a dark patch on his ribs where the right-hand blow had connected. Sloane rested until the count of eight, then rose to his feet and began to retreat, covering himself with elbows and gloves as Simon moved after him, bombarding him with swift and accurate punches, one of which sent the Englishman sprawling half-way through the ropes just before the bell terminated the round.

Dobson watched Sloane anxiously as he sat in his corner breathing deeply. His face was showing signs of the blows he had received; his nose and lips were swollen and there was a small lump above his left eye: but he did not look unduly worried, and again Dobson was comforted by the thought of the valuable years of gruelling ring experience Sloane had known which might even now guide him to victory.

Simon was breathing deeply but his face was unmarked. His head was thrown back, and the splendid black chest was rising and falling, as one of his seconds on bended knees massaged the athlete's calves, while a besweated colleague flapped at the polluted air with dexterous towel. Dobson thought that the group made a fascinating picture, the kneeling figure seemed to be in an attitude

of devotion before his idol. Then the gong clanged for the sixth round.

.. Sloane came from his corner with a slightly altered stance. He stood more upright and immediately began to push out an orthodox straight left. A murmur of disapproving consternation moved through the crowd, for it was generally believed that his only chance of victory lay in his adopting a crouching style which might negate some of the classical manœuvres of his opponent. But Dobson knew that he was intent upon putting his carefully rehearsed plan into action. Dobson leaned forward in his seat and watched Simon roll his head slightly to the left, allowing Sloane's arm to slide over his shoulder. Sloane had been right in his observation of the negro's one weakness, thought Dobson; Simon did use exactly the same evasive movement of the head whenever he slipped a straight left, and this left him open to a right counter. The trouble was, however, that he moved so quickly that the advantage to his opponent was of infinitesimally brief duration.

Sloane's right fist was cocked ready for action as he shot out another straight left, but Simon, swift as a panther, slipped inside and sent a sickening right uppercut to the solar plexus. Sloane's knees sagged and his gasp of pain was clearly audible to the ringside spectators. He lurched forward in an attempt to fall into a clinch, but Simon sidestepped like a bull-fighter and crashed another blow to the Englishman's temple. Sloane sprawled on his hands and knees. His face was twisted with anguish and it seemed unlikely that he would regain his feet in time to continue. But at the count of nine he arose unsteadily and as Simon attacked he instinctively began to duck and weave, riding away from the full power of the punches, falling into a clinch whenever possible until the referee was forced to pull him away. By these means he managed to survive until the end of the round, but he looked fatigued and battered as he went to his corner.

"He's got guts," said Dobson's companion. "I grant you that. But he won't last long now."

The minute interval of rest seemed terribly short and the sound of the gong for the seventh round struck a melancholy note, anticipating the end. The stools were pulled out of the ring and the two fighters moved towards each other, one dark-skinned, lithe and menacing, the other stocky, strong and defensive. They circled the roped square under the glaring light, both unaware of the thousands of eyes fixed on their every movement, both waiting for the opportunity to strike down the other; neither feeling enmity nor cruelty, but an obsessive determination to win, to lay low the dehumanised figure before him—the opponent.

Agnes Sloane sat in the armchair by the fireside, her neglected knitting on her lap. Her eyes were on the radio which stood on the sideboard no more than eight feet away. She transferred her gaze to a clock on the mantelpiece. Twenty-five past nine. Another thirty-five minutes, she thought. Another thirty-five minutes—unless it had already come to an end. She could find out easily enough whether it was still going on. All she had to do was get up and switch on the radio. Just reach out and turn a knob and she would know. But it wasn't as easy as that. She might hear something she did not wish to know. So she sat there looking from the clock to the radio, waiting.

Presently she rose and went into the kitchen and put the kettle on the gas. A cup of tea would steady her nerves. But almost at once she turned off the gas and went back to the sitting-room. There she stood by the radio indecisively, her fingers clenching and unclenching. Her lips parted, and with a look of apprehension she reached out and switched on. For a moment there was silence, then the room was noisy with dance music.

Frantically she manipulated one of the knobs. Fragments of speech in different languages jostled one another for release; bursts of music and sudden shrill whistles and crackling noises. Then a smooth male voice which managed remarkably to suggest both saloon bar and pulpit said with boyish excitement, "Well, Dave Sloane has given the fans a real surprise tonight. Here he is at the end of the eighth round and still far from beaten. He's taken a lot of punishment but he's fought back magnificently and whichever way the fight goes now he can be proud of his showing tonight. Let's hear what you think, Percy."

Another voice, less mellifluous and deeper, said, "Yes, Sloane is putting up a great fight against overwhelming odds. Simon is a splendid fighter. His reputation hasn't been exaggerated one bit. But sheer guts and ringcraft have kept Sloane going, and even at this stage he's still dangerous. One thing, though, puzzles me. He seems to be trying the wrong tactics. Instead of trying to get close to his man and wear him down with in fighting, he's standing up straight and trying to use a copy-book straight left. As a result Simon is beating him to the punch and giving him a lot of punishment he might avoid. Still, we all know it's easy to criticise but it's a different—" The sound of the gong interrupted and the first voice resumed in a tone of subdued delight and excitement: "Well, here we are in the ninth round. Simon, the coloured boy, still looks quite fresh and confident. Sloane is showing signs of wear but he's moving quite smartly round the ring. He leads with a straight left but Simon slips it and counters with a right to the body. Those body punches must be doing a lot of damage. I can see from here the great red patches on Sloane's ribs."

Then the commentator cried, "Ooh!" as if he had been pinched, and there was a tremendous volume of noise from the audience. "Simon is really going to work now. He just landed a terrific right cross and now he's

simply piling on the pressure. Left right, left right, to the head and body. And Sloane's down! Down for the—how many times has he been down so far, Percy? Five times—” down for the sixth time. He's trying to—”

Agnes switched off and returned to her chair. She sat in a posture of unnatural stiffness, her face strained and curiously angry. Why did he have to do it? He was worse than a child. He meant it for the best but he couldn't understand that he was ruining their lives, that he would finish up in a mad-house if he kept on being knocked about like that. This was the last time. She would tell him she couldn't go on any more. They had enough money to get a little business. They didn't want luxury; only the simple things. They were only ordinary people. The boys would be all right. They'd probably win scholarships to grammar schools. All Dave's talk about college was like the rest of his daydreams. They were ordinary people, not used to that sort of thing. She would tell him plain that he would have to stop. This must be the last time. She switched on the radio again.

Percy's voice was speaking: “The referee would have been quite justified in stopping the fight in that round. Sloane didn't land a single punch and he must have taken fifty. He looks in very bad shape indeed. This Babe Simon is phenomenal. He moves like a flyweight. I don't think Sloane can last much longer. I can see from here that one eye is quite closed and his body looks like a map of the Empire. His seconds are working furiously on him but I very much doubt whether he'll see the tenth round through. He's put up a fine show of British pluck and it would be no disgrace if he retired now.”

The bell sounded and the commentator took up his breathless account of the fight: “But he's not going to retire. Here he comes, plucky as they make 'em. Simon moves in with another of those damaging hooks to the body and another. Sloane leads with his left, misses and manages to block another hook to the body. Leads with

his left again and—oh! Simon cracks him with a savage right on the chin. Simon is stalking his man now. Sloane ducks away on to the ropes and the coloured boy goes after him. A left and right to the body from Simon and Sloane is hanging on. The referee separates them and another hard right to the jaw sends Sloane back against the ropes. He looks in a very bad way indeed but he's still fighting on. What courage! He's actually going forward now, but Simon is too fresh and strong. He lands another hook to Sloane's body and they are clinching again. The referee separates them and . . ."

Agnes, leaning against the mantelpiece with her head on her arm, was startled by a sudden yell of incredulity from the commentator and a vast roar from the audience in the background. She raised her head attentively.

"Sloman—Simon is down. He's down! Sloane has caught him with a terrific right. A beauty. Simon, Babe Simon is down. Five, six, seven—now he's getting up. A very shaken Simon—and—yes, his eye is cut! There is a gash over his left eye, and he looks decidedly in the wars. And Sloane is going after him. He's going berserk! He's chasing Simon, swinging lefts and rights. He's got Simon on the ropes and Simon's fighting back. They're swapping punches on the ropes left and right, left and right. And Sloane's getting the best of it! The crowd are going mad. A right there from Sloane, and left and a right. A right from Simon. They're punching away toe-to-toe, neither giving ground. Simon is covering up, ducking and swaying away from Sloane. The English boy is fighting mad. Simon slips away from the ropes and back-pedals across the ring, but Sloane is after him. Sloane lands his right again. Simon counters to the body but he can't stop Sloane. And there's the gong for the end of the round! But Sloane hasn't heard it; he's still punching away and the referee has to pull him away and send him to his corner. What a round! What

drama! Come in, Percy, and tell us what you think of that."

The towel flapping in the air above his head was like a flag celebrating his triumph. Gregory's voice was in his ear making sounds which had no meaning. There was a noise from beyond, from the crowd, like the noise of the sea. Like the noise the sea made at night. There was a noise in his skull too and in his body something was broken. But it didn't matter, the noise of the sea in his head and the broken thing in his body. It didn't matter because he had done it. It had worked. Simon slipped inside the left, inside. He was a sucker for a right. But he was quick too. It had taken a long time to catch him. Then his eye had opened. A great gash on the brow like a mouth dripping blood. A good boy but he was only human.

Tell Gregory. Gregory never believed it, not really.

"Listen, Sid, I did it. I told you I'd do it. Told you he always sways inside the left hand. See his eye, Sid. I got him."

Sid was talking. He knew his voice but not the words. The broken thing inside his chest hurt. The towel was gone and he was being pushed. Hands against his back were pushing him from the stool and he was broken inside and it hurt. It wasn't over yet. He'd got to do it again. Stick out the left and sling the short right as soon as . . . Sling it hard. There was fog in the ring. The fog was rising from the sea, the noise blew fog from the darkness and it was not easy to see. But Simon was there. Human. The cut over his eye, like a mouth on his brow. Push out the left and sling the right. Simon moving towards him through the fog like a ship. Out with the left. Out with the left. Then the right. But it didn't work. Something was wrong. There was too much fog and the hurt of the broken thing in his body. There was too much

against him. What round was it? The last? Maybe the fourteenth. You couldn't tell. He was tired, too tired to do it again.

Then the fog thinned; Simon swept it away with swift, curving black arm, and agony cried in his body as the brutal jolting blow thudded against his ribs. Another blow landed on the side of his jaw and he felt his gum shield leave his mouth. He struck out blindly but his desperate fist did not connect with anything. His gum shield gone, he licked his lips, and as he did so another blow crashed into his mouth and he felt his teeth sink into the tender flesh of his tongue and he tasted hot blood in his mouth. The sharpness of the pain shocked his mind into alertness, and he could see again with clarity. Simon was measuring him for another right to the jaw. He rolled away from it and swung his own right which also missed and he fell forward, grabbing at the black sweat-slippery arms, hanging on as if for life. He could hear Simon panting and could smell sweat, heavy in his nostrils, as they wrestled against the ropes. The referee dragged him off and he was aware of the fog descending again. He had to land his right just once more, once more on that cut. But Simon was only a dark shape moving tantalisingly before him, as intangible as the fog itself, and the pain in his chest was hurting like a saw. The sea sound was roaring in his ears and he swallowed blood like hot thick sea water as two more blows, heavy and black, thudded against his jaw. Then he was on the canvas. He had no sensation of falling but there he was lying on his back looking up at the blaze of the arc lamp. The pain in his chest seemed to be swelling as if to burst free from its prison, and his limbs felt as though they were held by great chains of lead. He thought that, except for the pain, it would be nice to stay there. Except for the pain he would probably be able to sleep.

Then despite the pain and the indescribable fatigue he realised what he had been contemplating, and he was

convulsed with shame. To lie down, take a dive, pretend he was knocked out when he was still conscious. The most contemptible action a boxer can perform. Immediately he began to drag himself into a sitting position. He turned over on to his knees and reached out ineffectually for something to assist him. There was nothing there. He shook his head and peered about him through the thickening fog. Then with an effort that pulled a groan from his lips, he lurched to his feet. He saw the dark shape before him again and he struck out wildly and hopelessly, and as he fell forward he was caught and held upright. He felt the smooth-muscled arms about him, supporting him, and could smell the dark sweat. There were voices about him, other people in the ring, but he could not make out what they were saying. What he did hear was spoken in a deep voice and with an unfamiliar intonation, "You poor brave fool."

Then he slept, but he took the pain with him into his sleep.

CHAPTER XVIII

DOBSON, with the other journalists and one or two white-sweatered attendants, waited impatiently outside the dressing-room. When anyone spoke it was in subdued tones, but few of them felt disposed to conversation. The air in the corridor was thick with tobacco smoke.

"Be too late for the first editions if we don't hear anything soon," somebody said.

Dobson did not answer. The memory of the last rounds of the fight filled his mind to the exclusion of all else. He felt exalted. He knew that the account of the fight which he had 'phoned through to his paper had been too rhapsodical for the conservative taste of McLaughlin, and he knew furthermore that the sports editor would take the first opportunity to ridicule him for his inaccurate prediction of the result; but he felt unreservedly glad that he made such a forecast, that he had been the only newspaperman to support the British champion.

Sloane's courage had been almost superhuman, his patience indomitable. He had taken more punishment than most fighters were called upon to receive in a dozen fights, and he had gone on and on, waiting for his chance to execute the manœuvre that he had practised so assiduously. And when the chance had at last presented itself he had grasped it without hesitation despite the fact that he was almost unconscious from the beating he had received. He had hurled himself upon the seemingly invincible negro with a fury and a bravery that was superbly mad, and he had fought with a strength and energy that would have been unusual for a first-round rally and was little short of miraculous in the tenth. Then

in the eleventh round, so battered that he could hardly stand, he had fought off the black figure of vengeance until he had collapsed. It had been a performance of heroic dimensions.

Dobson lit a cigarette. Sloane must be in a bad way, he thought. The doctor had been in there some time now. Perhaps Dave was concussed. He should retire from the ring after tonight if he had any sense. He probably had enough money to buy a little business or a pub. He had always lived quietly, and even after allowing for Gregory's dubious handling of his money there should still be enough left.

The door of the dressing-room opened and the group of newspapermen moved forward eagerly as a little elderly man came out, closing the door quickly behind him. He hesitated for only a moment as questions were shouted at him by different voices.

"How is he?"

"How's Sloane?"

"What's wrong with him, doctor?"

He said, coldly, "Excuse me," and pushed his way through his interlocutors and walked quickly away.

Two or three began to follow him, then discouraged by the determined set of his shoulders and the briskness of his step, came back to the main group.

"Knock on the door," suggested one. "The doctor's gone."

"Yes, knock on the door," other voices agreed, but no one stepped forward to do so.

"He's all right," said the reporter who had sat next to Dobson at the fight. "The doctor wouldn't have left him otherwise."

Quite suddenly Dobson felt a stab of alarm, a fear that he could not or dare not name. He said, "Stay here," and stepped towards the door. The others pressed close at his shoulder and he turned fiercely and said, "Get back, for Christ's sake. I'll give you the news."

He tapped on the door but could hear nothing from within.

“Keep quiet a minute,” he said over his shoulder and he knocked again. Still he could hear nothing, so he pushed open the door.

The smell of massage oils at once assailed his nostrils as he stepped inside.

“Sorry to barge in,” he began, then stopped.

No one spoke to him; no one moved. He saw Gregory seated on a stool in the corner, his huge fleshy face curiously deflated, hanging in loose folds of flesh about his half-open mouth. His eyes were staring without any expression in them at the wall. Standing near the massage table were two men whom Dobson recognised as the promoter and an official of the British Boxing Board of Control. Sloane lay on the table covered by the blanket under which he had lain before the fight. Now he lay quite still and the blanket was drawn over his face. On another stool at the foot of the table sat Hyams, the trainer. He was crying silently.

At last one of the men spoke. It was the man from the Board of Control. He said, “Who’re you? What do you want?”

Dobson’s voice was strained. “I’m from—I’m a friend. Gregory there knows me.”

The promoter said, “I know you. You’re a reporter.” He looked angry and afraid.

“I’m a friend,” Dobson said again, “a friend of Sloane’s.”

Then Gregory spoke. He said tonelessly, “He’s dead.”

Dobson felt them all looking at him. He saw Hyams lift his head, showing his ugly, scarred face, wet with tears, bewildered and frightened. He could think of nothing to say: nothing at all.

Then the promoter broke the silence. “You’d better tell the others,” he said, “and get the bastards away from here.”

Dobson nodded and made a meaningless gesture in Gregory's direction. Then he went out into the corridor. The newspapermen pressed round him.

"What's up? How is he?"

"What's happening in there, Dobson?"

Dobson said, with the same expressionless voice that Gregory had used, "He's dead."

There was silence for a second, then a burst of excited chattering.

"Dead! No kidding?"

Dobson closed his eyes against their avid, stupid faces, but already they were racing for the telephones. Then presently he went to telephone his paper too.

When he reached home that night Julie had gone to bed. He moved about the flat with great care in order not to wake her, but almost at once she called from the bedroom, "Is that you, dear?"

He answered, "Yes, I'll be with you in a minute," adding, "Is there anything I can get you? A drink or anything?"

At first she said she did not want anything but a few seconds later she called out that perhaps a glass of Horlicks might help her to sleep.

He went into the kitchen to prepare her drink and make himself a sandwich. His head ached badly and he felt desperately tired, though he suspected that sleep would not come to him easily. Memory of the immediate past threw image after image up to the surface of his mind, where they remained in bewildering profusion and confusion. Incidents that he could not remember having noted at the time were thrust before his vision with startling clarity. The expression on the referee's face as he had leapt forward crying "Stop!"—the expression that testified to his sudden understanding of the nature of Sloane's plight. The face of Simon as he

caught his tottering victim and supported him until his seconds came to carry the unconscious man to his corner. Simon with the great wound over his eye and an expression of melancholy compassion on his face.

Sounds echoed in Dobson's ears: the roar of the crowd, the peremptory command of the gong, the hoarse and powerful voice of the master of ceremonies as he made his announcements; the sound of leather thudding against flesh and bone, the grunts and scraping of feet on the rough canvas. And, as if superimposed by a trick photographer on this welter of impressions, he saw again the scene in the dressing-room, the still, shrouded form on the table, the stunned face of Gregory and the grief-distorted features of Hyams. He smelt the pungent aroma of massage oils, and he heard again the words, spoken without emotion, "He's dead."

Julie called to him and he hastened to pour her drink, deciding that he did not want the sandwich that he had started to prepare. Julie was sitting up in bed waiting for him. She was wearing a hair-net which held her hair tightly to her scalp, and her face, was shiny with some kind of cream.

She said, "Was it nice?" as she took the tray he held out to her.

"Was what nice?" he said dully.

"The boxing match, of course. That's where you've been isn't it?"

He sat on the edge of the bed and began to unlace his shoes. "No," he said. "It wasn't nice."

"It was the coloured man, wasn't it?"

Dobson grunted.

Julie went on brightly, "Did he win his game?"

Dobson laughed shortly, "Yes, he won his game."

She paused uncertainly, then said, "Did you want the other man to win?"

He stood up and began to undress. "Yes," he said, "I suppose I did."

"Oh well, perhaps he'll get another chance. Perhaps he'll win the next time."

"No, he won't."

He hung his jacket in the wardrobe and turned to meet her look of mild inquiry.

He said distinctly, "He won't get another chance because the coloured man played too rough and killed him."

Julie's eyes widened, then she smiled without confidence. "You're joking," she said. "It's just one of your stories."

He saw again the limp body of Sloane being borne from the ring, saw the head hanging loosely like a puppet's as they moved slowly down the aisle towards the dressing-room. He remembered the hush that fell upon the crowd.

He said, "Yes, it's a funny story, isn't it?"

She saw that all was not well. "Philip dear, what is it? What's the matter? Is it true: was he really—?"

"Of course," he said irritably. "I don't make up bedtime stories like that." Then he added, "He was a good man."

Amidst the echoes in his mind he reorganised fragments of verse. *I knew him, Horatio. They told me you were dead, they brought me bitter news to hear and bitter tears to shed. The pale, the fall'n, the untimely sacrifice,* and he was suddenly ashamed and filled with painful self-contempt. 'Oh Christ,' he thought, 'won't I ever grow up.' Colouring the event with Grub Street melodrama, looking always for copy, even in the death of someone he had admired and respected. And he had admired Sloane. Simple as he had been, Sloane had possessed a kind of greatness, not only in the ring but in his life, for he had always cleaved to what he believed to be good and true; he had never stopped fighting until the end.

Julie said, "It's too horrible. You poor thing."

Dobson felt antagonism gathering itself to combat her lack of comprehension. "Simon didn't hit me," he said. "I don't want pity."

"But to have to watch a thing like that. . . . Boxing must be even more dreadful than I realised. I didn't know they really killed each other."

Dobson put on his pyjamas. "You don't understand," he said. "It's not that he's dead. It's something else. People are always being killed; killed in stupid, ignominious ways. He died . . . never mind, you wouldn't understand."

"How can I understand if you never tell me anything? What don't I understand?"

He said, "We'd better get some sleep."

Darkness brought with it, almost at once, a disquieting sense of insecurity, of anonymous fear. There had been too much light, that evening, too much living, and now the darkness that had been there all the time, disguised, was upon him and he was afraid. He felt Julie's hand feeling for his own, find it and hold it tightly, and he returned the pressure of her fingers, suddenly grateful to her for her uncomprehending sympathy, and for her silence. He stirred, turning towards her, then settled back and withdrew his hand. He could sense her hurt bewilderment but still she did not speak.

What was the good of the false gesture, he thought, the gesture that would be denied in the first moments of awakening, the gesture that would be there to accuse and to mock him in the loveless morning?

He could not love; he had not the strength or the courage. The negative honesty of fatigue compelled him to admit that. Somewhere he had read that hell was the state of being unable to love. It was probably true, he thought. Loving was not easy; it was not the reflex action in the scented feather bed; it was a job of construction, long, difficult, and painful. He had not got the courage or the strength. Sloane had had the courage.

Perhaps it was easier if you weren't very intelligent. But where had it got Sloane? All the fighting, the courage, the abnegation of self? Nobody ever seemed to win. You were doomed to defeat before the gong sounded for the first round. But that didn't make sense. If there were the defeated, then there must be also the conquerors. Simon had won tonight. No, not really. He hadn't won: if you won a thing it was yours, you possessed it. He hadn't won, he had only destroyed, and destruction could not profit the destroyer.

He closed his eyes and waited hopelessly for sleep. How did Sloane feel? Nothing of course, unless . . . Nothing. The gong's clang would not force him again from his corner to meet the pitiless onslaught of a younger and stronger opponent. He could never again smell the acrid scent of massage oils, feel excitement of impending combat fevering the blood, nor know the drunkenness, the precarious exultation of victory. He would never again hear the roar of the crowd, like the sound of surf in his ears, nor feel his knuckles jar against opposing flesh and bone, see the eyes that had been so aware film over, glaucous, telling him that victory was in his grasp. Fighting was over for him. Everything was over, or perhaps . . . Everything, everything was over.

CHAPTER XIX

"DID he fire you?"

Dobson tipped back his chair and looked angrily at his interlocutor, a stout young man with an incongruously ferrety face. "Why should he?" he asked.

The reporter said, "The old McLaughlin is a man of violent passions, very apt to do irrational things. Not that it would be such an irrational thing, you must admit."

"What do you mean?"

The reporter was not intimidated by Dobson's tone and expression. "Well," he said reasonably, "you can't expect him to be overjoyed when his boxing expert makes a confident prediction that A is going to beat B and what happens is that B kills A. Literally, kills. Particularly when the expert is the only one in the world to make such a prediction."

Dobson said menacingly, "Stick to your fashion notes, son, and keep away from things you don't understand." His voice was controlled but he could feel the pulse throbbing dangerously in his temples.

The reporter moved away grinning irritatingly.

Dobson lit a cigarette and remained leaning back in his chair, smoking. When he had finished the cigarette he took his hat and coat and left the office. On his way out he said to the switchboard girl, "If anyone 'phones, I'm at the Simon Press conference. The Park Hotel. Be back about one."

Simon's manager had refused to make any statement to the Press on the previous night, but he had promised to hold a conference at noon the following day. Dobson

felt curious to see what Simon's reaction would be to the tragic outcome of the fight. He suspected that it would be indifference, but he was proved to be wrong. The negro was not present at the conference and his manager said only a few words to the newspapermen. Simon, he told them, had decided to retire from the ring and no argument could alter his decision. He was going to return to the United States as soon as possible and he had no definite plans for the future. Before leaving, however, he was going to make arrangements for Sloane's widow to receive his own share of the purse.

"Well, it's a story," said one of the newspapermen to Dobson. "Bet you anything you like he'll be back in the ring inside three months."

Dobson returned to the office to write his copy.

"Any calls?" he asked the switchboard operator.

"Yes. Somebody rang. Blake the name. I told him to try again shortly after one."

Dobson said that he did not know anyone named Blake. He was going to add, excepting William Blake, but a glance at the open novelette on the girl's lap warned him that he would be wasting his time. A pretty girl, too, he thought, but his appraisal and assessment were as automatic as a blink; the desire he felt was merely the faintest ghost, the desire for desire.

Depression inhabited him like a disease. The fight had absorbed the best in him and left only a residue of spent emotion and a leaden mental fatigue. There had been no catharsis after all. Sloane had not been a hero but a simple prize-fighter who had not had the sense to lie down.

Well, the lucky bastard was out of it now, he thought. But like the rest of his attitudes, Dobson's cynicism was counterfeit. He did not envy the dead; he knew that death was the slammed door, the vacant chair, the lowered coffin and the sense of loss and emptiness experienced by the living; Sloane had known what it was to die but

he was not experiencing death now. That was his wife's lot. Sloane was dead, was nothing. And it was not reasonable to envy nothingness. Or was it?

The telephone rang. The receiver seemed heavy.

"Dobson here," he said in a tired voice. "Blake? Oh yes, of course I remember you. Yes, that's right, at Gregory's. What can I do for you?"

Vaguely he recalled the young boxer, dark-haired, Latin type.

The voice, rather weak and nasal, seemed to betray nervousness. It was saying, "It's important. You was the only one I could think of. If you're not too busy. Just a few moments, that's all."

"Where are you now?" Dobson asked. "Holborn? Well, that's near enough. Come round to the office. What's that?"

Blake's voice sounded more agitated. "Well, could you—I mean it's sort of very private and I thought maybe you could just slip out for a few moments."

Dobson said, "Do you know the Mason's Arms, bottom of Fetter Lane? You can't miss it. I'll see you there in twenty minutes."

He rang off. What did the kid want? he wondered. He had sounded quite disturbed about something. But perhaps it was just nervousness and somebody had put him up to trying to get a Press puff. Well, a drink would be welcome and this would be an excuse.

Blake was waiting outside the saloon-bar door when Dobson arrived.

"We'll go in the public," said Dobson. "There'll be fewer people there."

The boy had his hands in his pockets, his shoulders hunched and his rather handsome fighter's face looked strained.

"What will you have?" Dobson said.

Blake cleared his throat. "I won't have nothing, thank you," he said. "I don't drink."

"Have a shandy: that won't do any harm."

Dobson ordered a half-pint of lemon shandy and a Scotch, and carried them away from the bar to a corner table. He lit a cigarette and took a sip of his drink. "What's troubling you?" he asked.

Blake's shoulders wriggled and his troubled eyes moved nervously. Then he said, "Well, I thought maybe you'd be able to help me. You being a reporter and educated and that. I thought maybe you would be able to tell me what to do."

Dobson finished his drink and excused himself while he fetched another from the bar. He felt suddenly kindly and paternal. He said, "Tell me what's bothering you. Are you in some sort of trouble?"

"Yes, I suppose I am really. It's about Sid Gregory and Tina—Mrs. Gregory."

Dobson's eyebrows raised slightly. "You know her?" he asked.

"Yes," the boy said: then after a moment's pause, "Do you know her, Mr. Dobson?"

"I've met her. What about her?"

Blake blushed, and Dobson was aware of shock and painfully strong curiosity. He remembered Tina, seductive and insolent, despising him. He said, trying to sound casual, "You knew her well?"

Blake nodded.

"Very well, I take it?"

Blake said, "I—we—yes, I knew her very well."

"You mean she is your girl?"

"Yes."

"Well," said Dobson, managing to smile, "what's wrong with that so long as Sid—oh, I see, is that the trouble? Sid's found out, has he?"

"She *was* my girl," Blake said. "Then everything went wrong. I don't know how it happened. One day everything was wonderful, then the next day it all went wrong. It was wonderful at first."

"Go on, son," Dobson urged gently.

Blake raised hurt and puzzled eyes. "I was going to marry her. I'd planned it. So's we could be together all the time like it was the first time."

"When was the first time?" Dobson asked, but Blake did not seem to hear the question.

The boy said, "The first time was like something you dream about, like the pictures or something. You don't think it can happen to you. When she told me to go and see her I never knew what was going to happen."

"Where was Gregory?" Dobson asked.

"Eh? In Brighton, of course."

"That was the first time?"

"Yes," Blake answered mechanically. It was obvious that he was thinking tenderly of the 'first night.'

"And Gregory knows all about it now?" Dobson had to repeat the question.

"Yes, of course he knows. I was in his flat when he came back."

Dobson said, "But I still don't see what the real trouble is. If Gregory came back and found you together he's bound to have kicked her out. What's to stop you getting together now?"

"It wasn't him coming back that worries me," he said gloomily. "It began before that. We was having a row before he got there. I smacked her one."

"Good God, why?"

"I don't know. I don't know what happened. I went there to tell her I was happy. I thought it was going to be smashing and everything went wrong. When she walked away from me the air went cold. I thought it was the same way with her, then it all went crazy."

Dobson said, "Just a minute," and went to the bar for another drink. When he returned to the table he found that the sense of anger and twisted jealousy had gone and that the dejected figure before him evoked a warmth of pity. He felt wise, and experienced and generous. He

said, "Listen, Johnny. The first time you went to her it was all strange and beautiful. It was magic, a kind of miracle. But after that you began to plan, and miracles can't be planned. You thought this thing that you couldn't understand was love. Perhaps it was a kind of love but not the kind that will do you or anyone else any good. Love isn't like that, not real love. It's a job, and it needs learning like any other job, and patience and—" He stopped, realising that Blake was not listening. The boy sprawled in his chair, chin resting on his chest, his eyes brooding over the glass of untouched lemon shandy.

Dobson was angered by Blake's inattention and by his own stupidity in speaking in such a way.

He said, "I must be going," and emptied his glass.

Blake started. He said, "Yes, right." Then, "What do you think I ought to do?"

"Do?" Dobson shrugged. "About what? If the girl doesn't want you any more what can you do?"

"Not only about that. I mean about Gregory. He could put me out of the game."

Some of Dobson's curiosity was revived. "What did he do when he found you with her?"

"I wasn't with her, not exactly. I was just coming out and bumped into him. We never said nothing to each other."

"So you don't know how he feels about it?"

"No."

"But he knows all about you and his girl friend?"

"He's bound to know."

Dobson said, "He's bound to know *her* version. She's probably said you raped her." He was irritated yet slightly amused at Blake's wince of distaste at the ugly word. He was thinking that it was a hundred to one against Gregory's knowing the facts or anything resembling them. That bitch had probably been able to pacify him with some cock and bull story that he would be happy enough to swallow as long as

it did no damage to his self-esteem. And why should he get it so sweetly? A stiff dose of truth would do him the world of good. Why shouldn't he take some of the punches for once?

He stood up and said, "If you've any sense you'll go to Gregory and get things squared up with him. What really happened? I suppose the girl invited you to the flat in the first place and made all the running?"

Blake looked more uncomfortable. He said, "'Course she asked me up there or I wouldn't have gone."

"Right," said Dobson. "You tell Gregory that. Tell him everything. That she made passionate love to you, then gave you the brush-off when she thought he was coming back. Gregory's not a child. He's a man of the world and he'll understand. He doesn't want to be rid of you: after all, you're a promising boy. Go and do that. Tell him the facts. It's always the best way."

"You think so?" Blake was doubtful but willing to be reassured.

"Certain of it. The alternative is to have him believe her story, and you can depend on it you'll be the villain of that little piece. He'd be a bad enemy. You go and see him and tell him everything. Your whole future depends on it."

They went outside into the bleak afternoon.

"Good luck," Dobson said, extending his hand.

"You think that's the best then?" Blake said.

"I am absolutely sure. It's the only thing to do."

"Well, thanks, Mr. Dobson."

They shook hands. Dobson watched the youthful figure walk quickly away and felt at once the invasion of self-contempt and remorse that was bound to have succeeded his action. He swore once, and began to walk quickly back to his office.

Sid Gregory stared at his visitor, almost with disbelief.

"What do you want?" he said, and his voice was unfamiliar in his own ears.

Johnny Blake said, "I want—I've got to talk to you, Mr. Gregory. About her—about Tina."

Gregory felt shock striking not so much at himself as at the familiar things about him: the framework in which he existed trembled as if at the visitation of an earthquake. He felt the sense of falling, and darkness came except for the white face of Johnny Blake motionless like a planet. Then suddenly normality was restored and he was aware of the heavy beating of his heart and an overwhelming curiosity.

He stepped aside and motioned to Blake to enter. In the opulent lounge he said, "Sit down," and he took a seat himself, watching the boy's eyes voyaging the room. 'Looking for her,' he thought, 'wondering where she is.'

He felt his mind become tense like a trained fighter's muscles and he knew that he would find out the truth from this dumb kid: and though he suspected that the truth would be horribly painful, the desire to discover it was as strong as lust.

Blake appeared less intimidated than Gregory had expected: "All right, I'll tell you the truth, Mr. Gregory, and you can believe it or not. She asked me to come up here that night when I rung you up after the Mile End show and you wasn't in. That's when she asked me first. I couldn't make out what she was after. I thought she was just being—well, I didn't know how rich people lived. And then she—I'd never have done anything if she hadn't started it."

Gregory felt despair shackle itself on to his spirits, and he realised that he had known the truth all the time but had not dared to confront it.

He said, "Not very gallant, are you, Johnny?"

Blake's face darkened and he looked much older than his years and very brutal. Gregory could see for a few

seconds the face that the matured fighter would wear. "No," the boy said, "you're right there. I'm not gallant—I don't feel gallant. I hate the bitch, hate the bleedin' thought of her."

"Take it easy," Gregory admonished, but his voice was tired. He said, "You'd better be on your way, Johnny."

Blake stood up. "I expect we're finished."

"What's that?" Gregory frowned absently.

"You won't want to see me at the gym no more."

There was a slight pause before Gregory answered. "Sure I want to see you. We won't let a little private matter affect business. We'll make a great partnership, son. Only the world title's good enough. Now, you be on your way and I'll be seeing you."

When Blake had left, Gregory sat in the over-large, impersonal room, his cigar smouldering in the ashtray at his elbow. He thought of the young boxer, without hatred and without pity. Johnny Blake was just a fighter, someone to be trained and instructed until he became a champion. Sloane had to be replaced, and it seemed that Blake had the makings of a first-rater. Then Gregory thought of Tina.

Soon she would be coming in from the cinema. She had changed since 'that night,' or at least she had seemed to have changed. She had been more affectionate and considerate, had almost deceived him into believing in her innocence over the Blake affair. He had not really believed her, of course; he knew that now. But he had been willing, even happy, to make the pretence of belief in repayment for the gratuitous kiss and unexpected word of endearment. Now he knew the truth: it was before him as palpable as the glossy piano and he would have to remember to walk round it. Otherwise he would stumble and be hurt. He was hurt now and he knew that it was his own fault. The room grew dark but he did not move from his chair to switch on the lights, for

darkness seemed appropriate in the loveless world that he had shaped for himself.

He did not know how much time had passed before he heard her coming into the flat. The lights dazzled him and he closed his eyes: so her voice came to him in the loveless dark. .

“Lazy old thing. Don’t you do anything but sleep? And no fire on! You must be frozen.”

He opened his eyes as she came over and kissed his forehead.

She said, “Feeling all right?”

“Yes,” he answered, “I’m all right.”

She turned on the electric fire and asked him if he wanted a drink.

“Go anywhere this afternoon?” she said as she poured it out.

He told her that he had not been anywhere.

“Anyone come to see you?”

He did not even pause before answering: “No, no one came to see me.”

CHAPTER XX

DOBSON was not sure why he had come to Paddington, but then he was rarely sure of the reason for any of his actions. Something to do with meeting young Blake. The talk of Gregory's woman, Tina, whom he had last seen in Archie's. An unconscious (unconscious, hell!) desire to see Tina again. Or to find someone like Tina. He marvelled at the fascination evil held for him. Somewhere he had read of the 'temptation to do good' but he could not envisage such an experience. For him temptation lay in the vicious, the shabby and the brutal: virtue and dullness were synonymous terms. It was all, he supposed, a symptom of the failure to grow up. Emotionally he was a minor. The double Scotch had taken the place of the walnut cream; the cigarette had usurped the sherbet dab; but the schoolboy's greed and selfishness remained.

Silently he swore, trying to hold back the deepening gloom with the incantations of the barrack room. He would feel better after a drink, he told himself.

Archie's club, dimly lit, haunted by the ghost of the 'thirties invoked by the sad and faded sophistication of the piano, welcomed Dobson with half-revealed promises of a gaiety that was only simulating death.

Archie himself boomed out a greeting and Dobson removed his hat, thinking that at least the light was kind. A woman with implausible red hair and a white swollen face watched him as he ordered his drink.

"Come and talk to me, darling," she said huskily, indicating the stool which stood by the one she was seated on.

Dobson glanced round the room and saw only a couple

of men talking earnestly in a corner. The invitation, then, was addressed to him.

He joined the woman and said, "What will you have?"

"Plain gin, dear."

He watched with distaste her pudgy features, the small, cruel eyes embedded in the lard-like face, and wondered why he had been unable to resist her advances.

She said, "I've seen you before."

"Yes?"

"You were with Tina Andrews or whatever her name is now."

"Oh yes," Dobson said, "I remember you now."

"Known her long?"

"Who, Tina? A year or so."

"Know her husband?"

"Yes," Dobson said. "I know her husband."

"He's rich, isn't he?" The small, black eyes held his own, unwinking, avaricious.

"Yes, I suppose he is."

"Young?"

"Depends what you mean by 'young.'"

She said impatiently, "You know what I mean. Under forty. Is he a good looker?"

Dobson suppressed a grin and said solemnly, "He's almost too beautiful for a man."

The woman looked impressed. "Oh well," she said, "some people have all the luck." Then she added, "They call me Louise. What's your name?"

"Anthony," Dobson said.

"Cheers, Tony. What do you do?"

"I'm a writer."

"You don't say! I could tell you a few things to put in your books, believe me."

"I'm sure," he murmured, feeling wretched. Yes, he thought, a schoolboy; greedy, boastful, selfish: a fat, bald schoolboy. One more drink and he would leave.

"What sort of books do you write?"

"Oh, various kinds," he said uncomfortably. "Novels mainly."

"Ever write a play?"

"No. Why?"

"Ever heard of Ronnie Beasley?"

"The name sounds familiar."

"Course you have. He wrote *Love-trouble*."

"Yes?"

"He's writing a play for me now. Specially for me."

"Fine," Dobson said. "Have another drink."

He bought the drinks, resolving that he would leave at once.

Louise raised her glass. "You've got nice eyes," she said. "I could tell you were a writer or something."

Dobson felt absurdly pleased. A compliment from an ageing harlot, purchased at the price of two gins, and he was flattered. He glanced down and noticed that her legs, generously displayed, were quite well shaped, and he thought, 'Two or three more Scotches and she'll look like Helen of Troy.'

She said, "Are you married? Yes, I can tell you are. Any kids?"

"Mercifully, no."

She looked shocked, "What do you mean, mercifully? A marriage is nothing without kids. I wish I'd got some."

"It could probably be arranged." Dobson said.

Her expression parodied coquettishness. She cocked her head to one side and said, "Naughty boy."

He was about to empty his glass and leave when another woman came into the club and greeted Louise. Dobson looked round and saw a doll-like blonde whom he remembered having seen on his last visit. Her face had less vitality than a cheap photograph but it was not offensive, was even pretty in its artificial way.

Louise introduced Dobson without enthusiasm.

"This is a friend, Tony—Miriam."

Dobson bought more drinks and, almost at once, Louise began to sing to the tune the piano was playing. She sang badly, trying too hard to supply erotic overtones. It became obvious that she was trying to recapture Dobson's attention.

Miriam said; "You don't come here often." Her lips hardly moved when she spoke.

"Not often," he agreed, offering her a cigarette.

Louise stopped singing. "What about me, Mike?" she said. "I've got all the vices too."

He apologised and gave her a cigarette. To have two women anxious for his attentions was a novel and pleasing experience. It was true that he was the only available man and that they were both probably whores, but again he felt flattered and elated.

"Drink up," he said, and called to Archie to replenish their glasses. Excitement quickened his pulses and gathered tight in his solar plexus. He found that he was humming to the piano. "Are you on the stage too?" he said to Miriam.

Louise broke in, "Why don't you write a play, darling? There's money in it."

He ignored her, waiting for Miriam's answer.

"I'm a model," she said.

"A model model," he said, "a delightful model," and he noticed that his voice was thickening. He would have to take it easy.

"Scuse me," he said and went into the lavatory.

Quite suddenly he felt sick. He was not drunk, he knew; but he felt dizzy and his stomach began to heave. But he did not vomit and after a while he felt better, but the elation had been utterly dispelled and tiredness fastened soft, heavy hands upon his mind and limbs.

When he returned to the bar the piano had stopped playing and shrill voices were raised against each other.

He heard Louise saying, “. . . and you’ve no damned right to come butting in.”

Archie’s amiable boom interrupted, “Now, girls, no quarrelling in here, or you know what’ll happen.”

Miriam, her mask-like face now alarmingly mobile, said, “Jesus Christ, I wouldn’t touch that little runt with a barge-pole,” and she swallowed her drink and marched out of the room.

Dobson had stood still, watching and listening to the performance, and a few seconds passed before he realised that he was the subject of their dispute. A tremor of revulsion shook his frame.

The white, bloated face turned towards him and he heard her voice calling to him over the beat of the piano. Quite slowly, he turned away and picked up his hat and went out into the shuddering, dark streets. He walked slowly for about two minutes, unconscious of the direction he was taking. Then he stood still on the pavement and said, loudly and distinctly as people brushed past him on either side, “I’m beaten—I’m licked.”

